

How Did We Get Here?

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

April 21, 2024

Reflection on the Annual Pledge Campaign by Clem Chow

I was born in China during the Sino-Japanese war and grew up in a traditional Chinese Buddhist household. I came to the UU Church rather late in life when both my late wife and I found a good fit at a small family UU church in Newberry, South Carolina in the mid-1990s. Later, we became rather involved at a small UU community church in San Antonio, TX until the church closed due to lack of membership. So, I know how important membership support is for the well-being of any congregation.

After moving to Vancouver, Washington, to be near our married daughter and son, both families live in Portland, we were busy with family and our new first grandson. Then after my wife finally ended her 36-year battle with breast cancer in July, 2018. I felt the time was right to check out UUCV. When I first saw the yard sign at the front of our church, I immediately felt at home. (*The sign said: In Our America, All people are equal, Love wins, Black lives matter, Immigrants and Refugees are welcome, Disabilities are respected, Women are in charge of their bodies, People and planet are valued over profit, Diversity is celebrated.*) Then I entered the sanctuary, I felt embraced, and I was comfortable with the people I met here. Everything felt familiar until we sang our first hymn, I just couldn't stop the tears. I knew then that I was home.

I began to attend church whenever I could. With a growing and working family, sometimes I had to split my Sundays between church services and family gatherings. Then I gravitated towards three interest groups, all started at the church. Even though I live in a retirement community with over 100 other folks, I sense more affiliation, emotionally and spiritually with people in these interest groups, so I realized that I should become a member of this church. Just about this time, I was contacted by Joyce Tobias for a pledge last year. I felt that even though I am not yet a member, I wanted to support the congregation, so I put in a modest pledge. I attended the three classes and became a proud member of the congregation. Now that I am a member, I want to provide my support to the congregation as many of you already do, in so many ways, not only financially. Since I don't have the talent or energy to do much else for the church, I will pledge this year three times what I did last year. Thank you.

[Reading: We Were Always Here by Rev. Connie Simons](#)

***How Did We Get Here?©* by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

This is the second of four sermons I'm giving leading up to the vote at General Assembly on updating the language of our Unitarian Universalist bylaws. '*How Did We Get Here?*' I'll be sharing this morning a little history and culture. Next Sunday will be the third '*What Keeps Us Here?*' on theology, and then we'll have a couple weeks off before the fourth and final in this series on May 19th, '*Where Are We Going?*' May 19th is also the last Sunday we're offering two services for a bit. Over Memorial Day weekend, we go into summer mode and offer a single service through Labor Day weekend. Just for the new among us, you should have that on your radar. But for now, let me return to the reading.

I must admit that Rev. Connie's Simon's words, which Ronnie read for us, stung a little. I'm not a white UU who would *prefer* to think of Arius as European; I just didn't know he was African. I had three years of seminary and an internship, focused on Unitarian Universalism, and I'm still overwhelmed by my ignorance at times. And I do worry about my ignorance causing injury or harm, the way I hear those words by Connie Simon and Rev. Mark Morrison Reed reminding me that "*we were always here.*"

For the record, I never thought the faith began in the 1960's or that James Reeb founded it. I did know about Arius and the Council of Nicea in 325 CE. I just hadn't paid attention to the fact that Arius was born in Libya and was of African descent.

History is not a simple matter of dates and facts and people. We tend to create a narrative that flows and makes sense, but it's always one version of the history and never encompasses all the detail. As I found with the sermon I gave last week on my own spiritual journey, there are so many different ways to capture ones' story. I told staff later that I had what Brené Brown calls a "vulnerability hangover" after delivering last Sunday's service, simply because I focused on my own life and struggled with what parts of it to share that were relevant and what was irrelevant.

It's the same with this much longer story of Unitarian Universalism. We do often start with Origen and Arius, both of Alexandria. We assume the Christian part, having developed out of that belief system. So we really start with Jesus, but after Jesus, we talk about Origen and Arius. Origen the man who articulated universalist ideas and Arius, the one who articulated unitarian ideas.

And this is where I always feel compelled to say that one can be a Unitarian Universalist without believing in unitarian or universalist ideas. Even though our name carries the legacy of heretical belief systems, or beliefs that were rejected by the church, we don't actually define ourselves by what we believe. Yet, to trace our history – how did we get here – we do generally trace ourselves back to those specific beliefs.

Origen was born in one of Egypt's main Greek cities, Alexandria, in the year 185. He was an early Christian theologian who articulated ideas of universal salvation. I find it fascinating that we know he was charged with heresy centuries after his death. But that he died in the year 250 from wounds he received from torture for expressing and spreading his ideas in nearly 2,000 separate written works. I guess being officially charged with heresy is different from being killed for heretical ideas. I'm going to quote directly from the UUA website, information online in a program called Tapestry of Faith – but you can look this up at your leisure if you like this kind of history. So according to the authors of Tapestry of Faith, Alison Cornish and Jackie Clement,

"Origen's basic premises were:

- *First*, That the souls of humans had existed in a previous state, and that their imprisonment in material bodies was a punishment for sins which they had committed;
- *Second*, That the human soul of Christ had also previously existed, and been united to the Divine nature before the incarnation of the Son of God which is related in the Gospels;
- *Third*, That our material bodies shall be transformed into absolutely ethereal ones at the resurrection; and

- *Fourth*, That all humans, and even devils, shall be finally restored through the mediation of Christ.

“While all these ideas were important in the development of Christian theology, of particular interest to Unitarian Universalists is Origen's ‘major heresy,’ that because Christ redeemed all humans, all would be saved in eternity. Origen did not believe in eternal suffering, and theorized that souls are re-born, over and over again, to experience the educative powers of God until they finally and eventually achieve salvation.” That’s the ancestor we trace our Universalist ideas back to.

Arius was of Berber descent, indigenous populations of the Maghreb region of North Africa, I’ve now learned. We trace our Unitarian ideas back to Arius, a Libyan priest, who lived in the 4th century, and now I’m going to quote Gail Forsyth -Vail from the *Tapestry of Faith* curriculum available on the UUA website:

This was “a time when the leaders of the Christian church, freed from persecution by the Edict of Milan in 312, were engaging in debates about the nature of humanity and the nature of Jesus. The Roman Empire was in crisis, pressured on many fronts by those who threatened to overrun it. There was a strong need to unify the Christian Church under the sovereignty of a protective savior. The Emperor Constantine viewed uniting the Christian Church as a way to strengthen and unify the Roman Empire and to bring order to the outlying areas. The endless religious debates, often leading to violence between partisans and riots in the street, were a source of significant annoyance to Constantine. In 325 he convened a council at his summer residence at Nicaea, in what is now Turkey, insisting that the bishops agree on a creed that would bring unity to the church. By the close of the Council of Nicaea, the Roman state and the Christian Church had reached a mutual understanding, with the emperor playing a significant role in the church and the church a significant role in the empire.”

“The priest Arius believed that Jesus was divine but somewhat less so than God. He believed that Jesus' wisdom and teachings were more important than his death and resurrection. Arius believed that human beings could draw closer to God by following those teachings. As the Christian Church solidified and unified in the fourth century and adopted a Trinitarian theology, Arianism became the archetypal heresy for the orthodox.”

This is where we start, sort of like last week when I started with being named in the car on the way to church. In the beginning. However, this is a history of ideas, and we don’t begin seeing Unitarian Churches until around the Protestant reformation and the 16th century with Francis David, spiritual mentor to the world’s only Unitarian King, King John Sigismund of Hungary and first Prince of Transylvania. Just as Calvinism and Lutheranism were being distinguished from Catholicism, Unitarianism is becoming its own distinct religious faith in this time period.

In fact, I am thrilled to be traveling to Romania in August for the Fourth International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women and People of Progressive Faiths. Thank-you, Monica, for inviting me – I’m going with the Rev. Monica Jacobson Tennesen, spouse of Jacob who read the story for all ages... Before the conference, we’ll be going on a tour of Transylvania discovering the cradle of Unitarianism. 16th century, not the 1960’s.

On the Universalist side, the Universalist Church is pretty much an American institution, born in this country, though tracing its ideas all the way back to Origen of Alexandria. We think of it as being

founded in the 18th century by white men like Hosea Ballou, John Murray, George de Benneville. However, a founding member of the of the first Universalist Church in the United states in 1785 was Gloster Dalton, a freed slave. Amy Scott, a free Black woman, was a founding member of the First Universalist Society in Philadelphia in 1790. There is a strain of Universalism in Japan begun in the 19th century, but for the most part, outside of America, you see Unitarian churches, not Unitarian Universalist churches. The Canadian Unitarian Council, for example, says on their website that ‘we are Unitarian Universalists’, but their name is still Canadian Unitarian Council. Same in much of Europe and Africa. There are Unitarian Churches in Africa, and they identify as Unitarian generally.

Because these two theological positions – universal salvation and the unity of God – were not adopted by the Church and Empire, they are considered heretical. Because those in power promoted beliefs in eternal damnation and the Trinity (God as three), Universalists and Unitarians have always had a deep respect for minority positions. They were not the position of power and understood how others without power could also be right. So on both sides of our history, while there were what we call confessions of faith – creedal statements of belief – in things like universal salvation and the unity of God – we also had “freedom clauses” which basically said, “and if you don’t believe this, you’re also welcome among us.” That’s how we get to this strange place of being named after theological beliefs you don’t have to believe in to consider yourself Unitarian Universalist! That’s a long answer to “how did we get here?”

But I could tell the story another way, about how we were founded in the 1960’s – not by James Reeb, who was already Unitarian by 1957 having left his Presbyterian upbringing. But because the American Unitarian Association, to which Reeb had joined, and the Universalist Church of America merged in 1961 to become the Unitarian Universalist Association. So, in that respect, we are a pretty young church. This congregation here in Vancouver was founded in 1953, also as Unitarian – before the merger, and named itself the Michael Servetus Unitarian Fellowship, after another historical heretic, I didn’t tell you about in this version of the story, only because Francis David comes first on the timeline, and to be honest, probably because I’ve got Romania on my mind with the Convocation I’ll be attending.

James Reeb is an important historical figure for us, as his murder by white segregationists and white supremacists while participating in the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965, was a pivotal moment in our history. His murder was treated so much differently by the media than that of Jimmie Lee Jackson who was killed by an Alabama State Trooper. It was Jackson’s murder weeks earlier that outraged the Black community and led to the long march from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery. On the one hand, it was a march for voting rights. On the other hand, when I took a civil rights pilgrimage to the south and met Jimmie Lee Jackson’s cousin, she said that his mother had wanted to march to Montgomery to place Jackson’s body on the steps of the Capital and at the feet of Governor George Wallace.

It’s a sad fact that it took the murder of a white man, James Reeb, to wake up much of the country to what was happening in Alabama and the South (and the North, to tell the truth, but only understood at the time by fewer people, and mostly those it hurt). That it took a white man’s murder to wake up America is emblematic of this culture of white supremacy in and to which we are all implicated, involved and responsible. And the murder of Viola Liuzzo, a white woman, and another Unitarian, lay person, who was helping with the marches. It feels like we tell that story over and over again: How black and indigenous women go missing and murdered and it’s not newsworthy, but a white woman is missing or murdered, it captures the headlines.

We have every reason to celebrate Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb for their sacrifices and commitment. And we need to work harder to tell the stories of those who have been ignored and overlooked, because they were always here, too.

When we first started talking about white supremacy culture in Unitarian Universalist congregational life, it was hard for many white members of our churches because it felt like we were accusing them/us of being white supremacist when we are decidedly vocal in our opposition to the Ku Klux Klan and the Proud Boys and white supremacists who proudly claim the title. They would point to our history of our clergy showing up in Selma when Dr. King asked, to the sacrifices of Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb, as evidence that we can't be a part of this thing we call white supremacy culture.

But culture doesn't work like that. Culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, religion, arts – we learn a culture when we learn to speak and think and walk and reason. We don't control what culture we are born into. We are shaped by it, and we shape it.... Though, as individuals, we tend to be shaped more by the culture than we have the power to shape the culture. Collectively, we have more power, as demonstrated by Higgins the drop in our story for all ages.

White supremacy culture is about power –and I am reminded of the way Emperor Constantine viewed uniting the Christian Church with a definitive creed (that left us out) as a way to strengthen and unify the Roman Empire and to bring order to the outlying areas. So, on the one hand, as the people who were left behind in that power grab, we understand being marginalized. On the other hand, we have grown up in this culture and unknowingly adopt some of its ways of seeing the world and being in it before we change and can change the culture around us.

Did I mention that vulnerability hangover after preaching last week? Telling the story of my life or multiple stories of my life, or just talking about myself was hard because, of course, I can see the ways in which I have adopted the culture I was born into, and the ways in which I'm still trapped by it, as hard as I try to get free and wake up. By trying to highlight the values of Unitarian Universalism last week, I was focusing on those qualities and was simultaneously and painfully aware of the ways in which I don't live up to those values on a regular basis.

I can sum it up with my favorite Jane Austen quote from the novel *Persuasion* “When the evening was over, Anne could not but be amused at the idea of her coming to Lyme, to preach patience and resignation to a young man whom she had never seen before; nor could she help fearing, on more serious reflection, that, like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination.” Ouch. That one gets me every time!

This is hard work, this examination of our spiritual journey – the personal and collective ones and it should be. That's how we grow. It's how we wake up to the injustices which surround us and we make changes to improve matters.