

*Our Universalist Miracle Story* by Rev. Doug McCusker

Is it just me, or do you also feel like we've been living through an ever-unfolding story this last year? As disgusting, mean-spirited and divisive that this presidential election has become, I am still riveted. I've said, "I can't wait for this election to be over." Most of the time I mean it. But wow, what a page turner it has become?

When I go out to get the paper in the morning, I immediately scan the front page to see if anything explosive happened overnight. When I connect to the Internet, I can't help but look at the headlines on my homepage. I'm always getting sucked in, and then I can't remember why I turned on my computer in the first place. "Now who was I supposed to send that email to?"

We've been fed a steady diet of scandals, threats, inflammatory rhetoric, international intrigue, conspiracy theories, debates and hilarious spoofs of the debates. Unfortunately, the story tellers have gotten so caught up in the horse race, that they've forgotten that there are real policy issues at stake here. They've focused so much on the characters that they've forgotten the plot.

Let's not forget that this is democracy in action and we are actors in this drama. This story is about us and our society. If you've been canvassing, or making calls for one of the candidates; talking to your friends and neighbors about it; debating with family members or sharing memes on Facebook, you're involved. And of course, our most important role is to vote. I hope everyone of you has registered and plans to vote on Tuesday if you haven't already.

Right now, it may feel like entertainment, but this is serious stuff. Real emotions of fear, hate, and mistrust have been unleashed. We have a toxic mess that we are going to have to clean up when this is over. And that's probably what has us in the most suspense. Can we go back to normal, or have we crossed a line of no return?

Stories are supposed to end at some point, or so we've been taught. We can put the book down and then go out and play. But the living story, the one that effects our daily lives writes us as much as we write it. It's been unfolding through time immemorial and it will continue to do so long after we are gone. We are part of a cosmic continuity in which the next page is always blank. While we are in it, we have a hard time identifying the plot twists. But when we look back, we can see patterns and relationships of events that make up the narrative history.

As I wrote in my newsletter article, I like to imagine that eons from now, when archeologists from another planet sift through the remains of what we humans left behind, they will find objects and clues about how we lived. But if they find our stories, they will begin to know who we are. As spiritual beings, we are planetary archeologists combing through creation's objects so that we may know the creator.

It's no coincidence that the great spiritual teachers throughout the ages were also great story tellers: Jesus with his parables, Siddhartha Gautama with his sutras, Mohammad with his dreams. Their stories were told and retold by countless people, most of whom

couldn't read or write. By trying to tell God's story, they were also telling the human story.

The story that Chris told this morning is revered because it is considered an origin story for the Universalist side of our faith. We usually focus on the two main characters, Thomas Potter and John Murray. But they were a snapshot in time, captured between a rich history of past events and a future that took their chance encounter and created a religion.

They were conveyors of an ancient story about universal love and salvation for humanity. Some of the earliest Christian theologians, like Origen of Alexandria, believed in the salvation of all. Medieval mystics like John of the Cross, who wrote about their dreams and divine encounters spread the story of universal salvation. Radical reformers in Europe affirmed universalism along with various other heresies. But universalism would not be embodied within a distinct organizational structure until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in New England, thanks to Thomas Potter and John Murray.

Universalism in America has 2 distinct roots from the liberal side of the European Reformation. One source can be traced to the German settlers in Pennsylvania who were German Brethren. These groups were Anabaptists who were persecuted back in Germany for their radical opinions about things like infant baptism and universalism. They believed that in the end, all of creation would be restored to harmony with God, and that anything else implied divine failure.

In the 1740's a physician from France, George de Benneville immigrated to Pennsylvania. He served as a doctor to settlers and native Americans alike. He was also a preacher who experienced a mystical vision of heaven as a young man that led him to believe in the ultimate salvation of all. He was welcomed as a friend by a cloistered community of German Brethren known as Dunkers who believed in the final restoration of all things. His message was well received there. They were missionaries who traveled to Barnegat Bay in New Jersey where Thomas Potter lived. It is extremely likely that Potter encountered these missionaries. Indeed, on his land, he built a meeting-house for itinerant preachers.

The other roots of Universalism trace back to a former Methodist preacher in England named John Relly. He believed in a mystical union of all people in Adam, and in Christ, the second Adam. Just as all humanity was affected by Adam's original sin, all humanity was redeemed by Christ when he died on the cross. Salvation was not reserved only for believers, but for everyone. It is not so much that one day, all will be saved, but that all have already been saved. All we must do is acknowledge our mystical union with God and rejoice.

John Murray, a devout Methodist was assigned by his congregation to recover a member who had become a follower of Relly. While trying to convince her of the folly of Relly's teachings, she instead converted him. He proclaimed his universalism and did some lay preaching around London. For this, he was kicked out of his Methodist congregation. Around that same time, his personal life was in a shamble. He was thrown in debtors' prison for a while. His infant child and wife became ill and died. He also began to lose his eyesight. Feeling alone, he contemplated suicide. Fortunately, he

decided to travel to America to lose himself in the wilderness. In a sense, when Murray met Potter that fateful day in September of 1770, Rely was meeting de Benneville, and all the ancient mystics of universalism.

With Murray's first sermon delivered in Potter's overflowing meeting house, American Universalism was born. The controversy spread like wildfire. Universalist preachers traveled the countryside, braving death threats and stones thrown at their heads through church windows, to bring the glad message of God's love for all people. Opponents warned that the belief in universal salvation and redemption would quickly destroy the moral soul of our nation – that without the knowledge and threat of hell, no one would strive to be good.

It may seem strange to dredge up a three-hundred-year-old story about salvation doctrine when our nation is bitterly divided along different visions of who we are as a society. What are we to make of this old story at times like these, when we have lost our ability to conduct civil discourse and our democracy seems to be falling apart; when violence appears to be a constant news story and xenophobia is raising its ugly head.

When our faith in humanity is challenged, it is important for us to support each other through our struggles and despair. I am reminded that I am part of a living tradition that gives me strength and inspiration. I am part of a faith community that was willing to espouse heresies when the heart would not let it do otherwise. I am connected to a line of succession that believes that we do not need the threat of damnation to do what is right.

This old story reminds us of the abiding message of Universalism, to the call for an inclusive welcome and universal solidarity; to the ancient story that every human being is a child of God, deserving of love, justice, and dignity. It was radical 300 years ago, when most churches preached hellfire, division, and damnation, and it is still radical today.

Our lives are more deeply interconnected and intertwined than we may ever fully know. And so, we still have need of Thomas Potter's dream married with John Murray's message of hope. We still have need of sacred spaces, where we can come together to share our honest pain and to reach for a larger vision of humanity.

Our Universalist story is a beautiful story about the sanctity of our lives and how we use it to create a Beloved Community for the entire world. It is a hopeful story that despite our individual limits, fears and compulsions, we can love and be loved in this life. When we feel lonely and isolated, love takes us in. When we miss the mark and feel guilty for our missteps, love can show us the way back. When we are weary and beaten down from evil and injustice, love maintains our spirits. It's an ancient story told in every language by every people, and yet it is still as fresh today as it was when it was first told.

It's a story that never dies as long as we have the will to simply love our brothers and sisters. Concepts like peace, truth, and justice are chapters in this never-ending story. They are the virtues that together will make our vision a reality. We may not be there

yet. We will suffer setbacks. None of us will probably ever see it come to fruition. But that does not excuse us from writing our part in the story.

Last weekend, I attended a spiritual retreat led by Father William Menninger, a Trappist monk. He wove together several mystical masterpieces like the Bhagavad Gita and the Cloud of Unknowing to distill ancient wisdom that is still relevant today. The central theme of all these mystical writings is to “let go and let it be.” Simple words, and yet so very hard to do. They teach us to let go of all our attachments even to the things that we consider to be ultimate goodness. In other words, do the right thing without any concern for the outcome.

The work of our spiritual journey is to nurture that vision of a Beloved Community without being attached to it. As a community, we covenant to walk together in love and to reinforce for each other the touch points to this central, life-giving story. They include our Unitarian Universalist principles that guide us like navigational stars. Faith development in the form of stories, spiritual practices and social witness to keep our guidance systems calibrated.

When we are unambiguous about what our religion stands for it frees us to express our central story in all the ways that define our lives. We can tell the story through our worship, politics, work, play, art, and how we treat each other. All these practices teach us to act into new ways of being and to live into the Beloved Community. As we learn so we live and as we live so we learn.

Do not be deterred by the rancor and vitriol that dominates this election. It may be entertaining, and at times, sickening, but it's just a distraction for the work we must do. It takes every one of us to keep our beautiful story of universal love alive. And if we do, maybe those inter-planetary archeologists will find that the story of the creator and the story of humanity are truly one in the same.