

When a Unitarian Met a Universalist: The Rest of the Story

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This reading is a beloved Universalist exhortation written by Alfred S. Cole, as if in the voice of John Murray.

Give the people something of your vision. You may possess only a small light, but uncover it. Let it shine. Use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. So speaks the spirit of Universalism. No one is beyond the reach of love. No soul is disposable. Hope is stronger than condemnation. And the circle of belonging is wider than fear has taught us to believe.

And then a Unitarian draws near and asks, "What do we mean by love? What does truth require of us? How shall we test what we have been told? Not to diminish wonder, but to meet it with honesty."

The Universalist answers, "Love is not proven by exclusion. Hope is not made smaller by questions. The light belongs not to the few, but shines through every life."

And the Unitarian says, "Then let us bring our reason, our conscience, our experience, and our questions. Let us not mistake any one lamp for the whole of the sky."

Together they discover we need both the widening heart and the questioning mind, the courage to hope, and the courage to examine, the faith that no one is outside the circle, and the freedom to keep making that circle more just.

Perhaps this is the rest of the story. Not that Universalism and Unitarianism become one by becoming the same, but that each has something that the other needed. One said, "Love will not let us go." The other said, "Truth asks us to keep growing." And together they say, "Let our small lights shine." Not as certainty, but as an invitation. Not as a claim to possess the truth, but as a promise to seek truth together. May we offer one another not hell — but hope and courage. Not easy answers, but honest questions. Not a narrow gate, but a widening welcome. For we are still meeting, Universalist and Unitarian in every heart that dares to love more widely and to seek more deeply.

I want to take you to a stretch of New Jersey shoreline ... a long time before any of us were born. Not a famous shore, not a city, just land and wind, and a farmer who could not read, standing where the waters held promise. His name was Thomas Potter. He thought about God the way a person thinks about the weather — daily, slowly, with his whole body and soul. He watched the sky. He looked out to the sea. He waited on things that he could not hurry.

His neighbors went to church. And as far as he was concerned, they came back smaller. They had been told that they were doomed. They had been told that most of the human family was already lost and that a loving God had arranged it that way. Potter could not make that sit very well with him. He had heard a rumor though, from across the sea, a quieter gospel, that God was love, that no one was made for the fire, that hope was not a luxury for the few. Well, that farmer liked that rumor a lot better than what the preacher was preaching in the church nearby.

Then he had a dream. In the dream, he was told to build a chapel near the water. Not because he had a preacher, not because he had a congregation, but because someone was coming - someone who would stand in that little wooden room that he was going to build and say what his neighbors had never heard before. So he built it.

Can you see him? Hands that knew a plow better than a hymn book, building a little chapel out of lumber from his land. First the wooden foundation, then the walls and the roof, and finally the handmade benches and the pulpit that stood waiting like tables too soon set. He and his little chapel in the grass by the sea. And he waited. And he waited. Years some say, long enough for the neighbors to laugh at him. Long enough for an empty church to become a story that people told about him. 'There goes Potter, still tending to a house that God forgot'. He did not argue. He kept the faith that someone was surely on the way.

Now I must take you to another shore. In England, there was a minister named John Murray. He had already lost almost everything a person can lose. They had closed the pulpit to him because he would not preach that God created children for hell. Then his wife died. Then his infant son. The bills for the care of both of them almost put him in prison. He was done. Done preaching. Done hoping that words could mend what the world had broken. He booked passage to America on a ship called the *Hand-in-Hand*. When they asked him why he was going, he said, "To lose myself." To lose myself. That is not a missionary speaking. That is a man trying to disappear. That is a broken man.

Well, fate would have it that the ship he was on struck a sandbar and went aground off the coast of New Hope, New Jersey. The wind pinned it there. The captain saw that they weren't moving anytime real soon, and so he sent Murray ashore to find food. Guess where he landed? He landed on Thomas Potter's land. Potter came down to the water, looked at this stranger, this exhausted man who only wanted to vanish, and said, "I've been waiting for you."

Murray now did not want to be found. He did not want a pulpit. He did not want his heart broken again. So Potter, who could not read, but who knew how to wait, offered him a test. He said, "If the wind turns and your ship is gone by Sunday, I was wrong. But if Sunday comes and you're still here, you will take it as a sign. You will climb into that pulpit that I built for you, before I even knew your name.

Well, Murray thought about it and finally he agreed. He was sure the wind would save him from having to speak. Well, Friday the ship still held fast on the sandbar. Saturday, the wind had not changed its mind. And on Sunday, September 30th, 1770, the ship called the *Hand-in-Hand* was still caught on the sandbar. But Murray waded ashore because he had made a promise. He walked into the little chapel that had been waiting longer than he had been trying to lose himself and he preached – not about hell, but about hope. He spoke God's love for every human being without exception.

This is how universalism came to the country. It's a true story. Not through a council, not through a creed, through a farmer who had a dream and built a room for a stranger and a broken minister who thought he had come here to get lost.

I think some of us have been on that kind of shore. Some of us have sat in churches that made us feel smaller. Some of us have tried to lose ourselves and some of us have built a little room in our heart and kept it even when others didn't come. And some of us are here this morning because a place was made ready before we knew that we needed it and that we would be here.

That is the Universalist half of our name. It does not begin with an argument. It begins with a farmer saying to a stranger, I have been waiting for you. The rest of the story is about the other half of our name. The Unitarian with a mind that would not go dark and a god who would not be divided into three. And how, after a long courtship, those two sat down at the same table.

But I wanted you to meet Potter first because before there was a denomination, there was a farmer keeping an empty chapel by the water, trusting that love would know the way to his shore. So he built that chapel on a dream that he believed in and he waited. And then there's Murray who climbed, against his own will, into that pulpit. Hope has been spoken where hell used to be the only word that was carried in that time.

And still, if you stand on that shore long enough, you will see another figure. Not from a shipwreck this time, but from a long argument in the soul. He does not look like Potter. His hands know books better than a plow. He has sat in many a fine church and still gone home hungry. He has loved Jesus and been told that love is not enough unless he will also say what he cannot say. His name is William Ellery Channing. And the word they used on him, the word they called him was Unitarian. They did not say it kindly. They said it the way people say a name when they want you smaller. As if one god were a shortage. As if a mind that asked questions was a kind of unfaithfulness. As if the Trinity were a door and he had refused to walk through it. And so he must be left outside. He grew tired of that. Not angry in the way that could burn down a room, but tired in the way that a person gets tired when they have been misnamed for years. And something deeper in him finally says, "If that is the word you will have for me, then I will take it. I will wear it. I will tell you what it actually means."

So he walked up to a shoreline of his own life, carried a different hunger than Murray's. Murray had asked, "Does God love everyone?" Channing asked, "May I keep the mind that God gave me? Do I have to surrender that? And is God one truly one or have we divided the holy until we can no longer find it?"

On May 5th, 1819, about 50 years later, at another man's ordination, he stood up and claimed the insult as his name. He said, "There is one God, not a committee of three, the father, the living source." He said, "Jesus is our teacher and our companion, fully human, luminous, a life that shows us how to live, not a second God who had to be killed so the first God could stand to look at us." He said, "The Bible is a book written for human beings in the language of human beings. Look beyond the letter to the spirit. Reason. Reason is not the enemy of faith. Conscience is not a rebellion. It is a gift. He said, "A good God does not make children already damned."

Can you hear how close he already was with Potter's Chapel? One man saying no one is beyond love. One man saying no one has to turn off the light inside them to belong. They hadn't sat down together. They did not even know they were walking towards the same table. But the inner call was the same call. Grace moving under two different names. Patience taking the long way around. Channing's people were often the ones who could not make their hearts kneel to a doctrine that their conscience would not bless.

Does that sound familiar? Have we often felt that way? To have to kneel to something that inside we know doesn't feel right. They had sat in pews and felt the split. The mind saying one thing, the mouth being asked to say another. Some of you know that split. It can be a lonely place. It can feel like you are the only one who cannot make the words fit. And many of us end up carrying guilt as though we have somehow done something wrong.

The Unitarian half of our name is for that loneliness. It says you may bring your questions in the front door. It says God is not honored by the dimming of your mind. It says Jesus does not need us to make him into what he never asked to be in order for his life to change ours. If the Universalist built an empty chapel and waited, the Unitarian kept a lamp in the window, a small, stubborn light, the light of a person who could no longer pretend.

For a long time they would circle around one another. The heart people and the head people. The ones who could not bear hell and the ones who could not bear a divided god. A whole century almost, too near to kin, someone will say later, to be married. But that is the rest of the story. It took until 1961. But you see where the seeds were planted.

This morning, I only needed you to see him arriving. A man who took back a word that was meant to wound him. Who took back the name Unitarian. A man who walked toward the water carrying his conscience like a lantern — and a chapel, though it did not know it yet, had been built with a second chair and how they were both on that sandbar waiting.... but then they took action. The farmer's chapel, the minister who tried to disappear, the other minister who would not let his mind go dark.

Heart has arrived. Mind has arrived. And if we're very still, and if we look back through this story, we will notice that we were never really only two, a Unitarian and a Universalist. Someone was already there. The one who spoke in Potter's dream before he had a preacher. The one who pinned the ship to a sandbar when a man was trying to lose himself. The one who would not let Channing be named only by his enemies. The one who walks the soul the long way around and does not leave it.

Call it spirit. Call it grace. Call it a deep inner longing that builds room before we know we will even need it. That is the trinity this morning. Not a puzzle to be solved. Not three gods tied in a knot. A living three that every one of us already knows in our body. The heart which refuses to believe that anyone — that anyone is beyond love. The mind which refuses to go dark in order to belong, and the spirit who holds them both while the soul walks, sometimes for years and waits sometimes for years as Potter did by the water.

So, how gently this undoes our loneliness. We thought we were walking alone at times. We thought that the empty chapel chapel may have been foolishness. We thought that the questions in our heads were a failure of faith. We thought the questions in our heads were a failure of faith and we carried that. And all the while we were being held — mind and heart not at war, a spirit that could carry both without dropping either. This is why the two names finally sat down together. Not because they won an argument, because they recognized the third. They recognized the third.

The Universalists laid down this. You cannot be lost beyond love.

The Unitarian laid down this. You do not have to dim your light to come in.

And spirit, who had been patient longer than either of them, said, "There — now you have a table."

A hundred years they circled, too near of kin to be married, Star King said. And still they took the long way, not alone, whether they realized it or not. That too is spirit. Spirit is not always swift. Spirit is the waiting. Spirit is the wind that will not change until after a Sunday morning, when finally that minister that he had waited for so long could step up into that pulpit that he built with his own hands from a dream having faith. Spirit knew that the name that was given to Channing was not a dirty word like someone wanted to make it. Spirit pulled up a chair, a second chair, and knew that this meeting was meant to happen.

If we come here with only a heart, we're complete, and we will find a mind here that will not shame us. And if we come with only a mind, we are complete also, and you will find a heart that will not send you away. And if you come here worn thin, unsure if you have either one left, you are the reason this chapel was built.

The soul takes a long journey walking. It does not walk alone. It is deeply held. Heart, mind, spirit. Now there's a trinity. And the rest of the story is simply this...

The door's open. The chair is yours. And someone has been waiting for your light.

We are the rest of the story that continues.

And so it is.