



A talk by Vandy Savage, Congregant

November 4, 2007

MISSING U

This morning's talk is in 3 parts. In this first part, I would like to suggest that names are an important way in which we communicate. The second part looks briefly at the theological history of Universalism. And in the third part, I make a proposal and dream big. But, back to the first part of this talk. So, What is in a name?

(Juliet is standing on a balcony in the moonlight. Romeo is below her, hidden by shadows and trees. Romeo strains to hear Juliet.)

Juliet.

O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

Romeo.

[Aside.] Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

Juliet.

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;--
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title:--Romeo, doff thy name;
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

Romeo.

I take thee at thy word:
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

Of course we all know how that worked out. Juliet and Romeo would gladly give up the burden of their names, but as members of feuding families, they could not escape their brutal heritage.

Names and the naming of things, is our basis for communication with each other. Whether we wish it so or not, the names we choose influence our response to things and to others.

The famously pragmatic Confucius was asked by a disciple what his first order of business would be if he were to govern a state. He replied roughly “insure that names are used properly.” His disciple was somewhat incredulous and asked, “Would you be as impractical as that?” Confucius explained that proper nomenclature is the basis of language and that language is central to taking care of things.

Proper nomenclature is one way in which we seek to understand our world. Consider the care with which scientists organize our world using a hierarchy of names: the periodic table of the elements, classifications: species, genus, family, the ordering of our universe into planets, stars, solar systems, galaxies...and on a more everyday level, we name our children, our streets, cities and towns, our provinces, rivers, lakes, mountains and seas. Names are essential to the understanding and navigation of our world.

OK, you might be saying, we got it, names are important. So what?

We are in the midst of big changes at North Shore Unitarian Church: settling our new minister, probably moving to a new location, embracing the challenge of becoming more accessible with an eye toward growth – yet in spite of all of this activity, I did notice that we are missing a “U.” Neither our church nor the CUC includes "Universalist" in their names.

Having perused the CUC website, I note that the term "Universalist" is included in the vision and mission statements as well as the "beliefs" brochure, but not in the name. More troubling to me is that the word “Universalist” doesn’t appear at all in our Mission or Vision statements, nor it is included in our name. It is clear that when the CUC was founded, there were very few Universalists remaining in Canada - 3 Universalist churches (Olinda, Ontario, North Hatley, Quebec, and Halifax, Nova Scotia) versus 36 Unitarian churches and fellowships. Yet, as a Unitarian Universalist, I have a certain fondness for that second “U.”

But, what is Universalism and why do we need it?

I was surprised to learn that the first clearly Universalist writings, are nearly 2000 years old. Mark Harris writes, “During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. Some early Christians believed that all souls would ultimately be saved, and that

God would condemn no person to eternal damnation in a fiery pit.” This was the original essence of Universalism – universal salvation...But in 325 CE the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma and for centuries thereafter, people who professed Universalist beliefs were persecuted.”

In the next 1400 years or so, western theology lurched along and Universalism was largely absent from the debate until Englishman John Murray introduced Universalism to North America.

It's 1770 in England and John Murray is depressed, almost a broken man. A lay Methodist preacher, he's read extensively and through reason and logic, adopted a Universalist theology and been summarily excommunicated.

To add to his disgrace and sorrow, his son and his wife die and Murray can't pay the doctor bills and is forced to serve a short term in debtors' jail. Upon his release from the jail, he resolves to start life afresh in the New World—and never to preach again.

But fate or—as Murray would later see it—Divine Providence intervenes. The ship on which he set sail runs aground on a sand bar off the New Jersey coast. The captain chooses Murray to go ashore to acquire provisions.

MEANWHILE

Thomas Potter, a well-to-do but illiterate New Jersey farmer had also arrived at a Universalist theological position 20 year earlier and built a church and optimistically waited for a preacher to appear and preach Universalism.

You know what's going to happen next. Ashore, Murray happens to run into Potter and Thomas Potter thinks Murray is the preacher he has long been waiting for and he prevails upon him to preach the following Sunday, it then being Friday. Murray reluctantly agrees, providing the wind doesn't change and free the ship before Sunday. Saturday afternoon, the ship is still there. Murray decides to prepare a few remarks – just in case. Sunday arrives and the ship is still stuck on the sandbar so Murray preaches a sermon on Universal Grace in Thomas Potter's church. Shortly after he finishes, the wind shifts and the boat is freed, but Murray stays and the experience changes his life.

A few years later, he founds the first Universalist church in North America, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. And 61 years after its arrival in New Jersey, Universalism makes its way to Upper Canada.

Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized. The Gloucester church included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry, beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown.

From Murray's first reluctant sermon, Universalism grew, until at its height in the late 19th century it was the sixth largest denomination in the US. In Canada, there were many more Universalist churches than Unitarian churches. The dominance of Universalism in Canada didn't last largely because in the 20th century people moved from farms to cities to make a better living.

Universalism was primarily a rural, working person's religion whereas Unitarianism was chiefly popular among the urban, educated and the wealthy. Many of the early Universalist preachers were frontier circuit riders, challenging the Calvinist hellfire-and-brimstone theology commonly preached at tent meetings and revivals.

Hosea Ballou was a major early 19th-century Universalist. Ballou was convinced that a good and perfect God would never create a being whose destiny lay more in suffering than joy and wholeness. Ballou's Universalism meant not only that all human kind would be saved, but also that Christianity itself was not a necessary factor in God's universal love. Ballou emphasized human reason and rejected: miracles, the Trinity, the existence of hell, and the deity of Christ. This kind of radical universalism opened the door that would eventually lead to our modern Unitarian Universalist idea that all paths to knowledge, truth, and/or God, have merit and are worthy of exploration.

Ballou was riding the circuit again when he stopped for the night at a farmhouse.

FARMER: (Upset) "What am I to do? My son is a terror. He gets drunk in the village every night and fools around with women. He won't listen to me and I am truly frightened that my son is doomed to spend eternity in hell."

BALLOU: "All right, I have a plan." (Serious face) "Is there a place where the path your son travels on to and from the village narrows?"

FARMER: "Yes, just near the creek."

BALLOU: "OK. We'll find a place near the creek where your son will be coming home drunk tonight. We will gather wood at that spot and build a big fire. When he comes home, we'll grab him and throw him into it."

FARMER: (Shocked) "What? I can't possibly throw him into the fire. No matter what he's done, he's my son and I love him!"

BALLOU: "Ah. If you, a human and imperfect father, love your son so much that you wouldn't throw him in the fire, then how can you possibly believe that God, the perfect father, would do so!"

Canadian Rev. Margaret K. Gooding notes that in Canada and the US, Universalists met with discrimination. When Universalists of any age walked down the street in Halifax, home of Canada's oldest surviving Universalist congregations, people would comment, "There goes a child of the devil."

In Winnipeg, it is recorded that some of the more orthodox Christians refused to serve Unitarians or Universalists in their shops or patronize Unitarian or Universalists' businesses.

Undeterred by discrimination and scorn, Universalists continued actively delivering their message. In 1892, Magnus Skaptasson, a Lutheran circuit preacher, delivered his "Easter Sermon" to seven of Winnipeg's Interlake Lutheran churches. A Universalist sermon, it attacked the idea of hell and proposed a more humane and a more human approach to salvation. A large number of these Icelanders found themselves persuaded to a new religious position and five of the churches converted en-masse.

In the mid 1800s, Universalists were actively engaged in women's rights, social justice, fair labor practices, temperance, non-sectarian education, the humane treatment of animals and children, and political reform. Unitarians, Universalists, and Transcendentalists were exchanging ideas, squabbling with each other, and redefining liberal religion. Anglicans were holding on for dear life.

By the 1890s, Universalists had abolished official creeds, preferring instead to leave matters of belief up to each individual member. And Universalists sought to explore the "universal" bases of all religions.

In 1943 Dr. Robert Cummins stated that: "Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism is universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that all are welcome: theist and humanist, Unitarian and Trinitarian, colored and color-less."

Due to the close theological kinship, which many Universalists felt toward Unitarians, and vice versa, in 1961 a formal merger was enacted. The organizations of the Canadian Unitarian Council and the Unitarian Universalist Association were born joining Unitarians and Universalists together.

Apparently, we missed that memo. Something is missing from our name – the second "U."

Now we're back to the importance of names. Our name matters. It conveys our image of ourselves, and expresses our theology.

Consider the word Universalist. Even if you don't know its history, the word itself conveys inclusiveness.

Let me persuade you to consider an idea for a new name for our congregation.

NSU²C (North Shore Unitarian Universalist Church) (nickname: North Shore UU Church)

It retains our original letters. It adds the second "U" using the mathematical notation for "squared" and thus suggests reason/math/science. And as Jill Whitford pointed out to me, it literally says "You too (U²)" implying the inclusiveness of our community. I think that we would send a stronger signal of that inclusiveness by proclaiming both our Universalist and Unitarian heritage and theology.

OK, here's the final part of my talk, where I take this idea of Unitarian Universalism and dream a much, much larger dream.

For me, Universalism, is an integral part of our heritage and more importantly, a vital part of our "moral compass." Universalism's humble origins, emphasis on reason, focus of social activism, its belief that lasting truth is found in all religions, and that dignity and worth are innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, or class, can have deep meaning for millions of people today.

I perceive that our modern world is in the teen years of its Global Village stage, with business and information operating well beyond the control of individual countries. Corporations, unbridled and amoral, are linking all of us together into one huge economic pool of consumers and producers with little regard for the consequences. I believe that we can use the free flow of information to add our Universalist and Unitarian principles to the conversation - tempering the corporate bottom line with concern for people and our planet.

Furthermore, I see Canada as a country that is paradoxically, aggressively neutral. Not passive, looking inward, like Switzerland, but active, working to build understanding, putting forth effort to promote compromise, sending soldiers into danger as peacekeepers. What other country has been able to find a solution to internal separatist discord through peaceful negotiation and compromise? USSR, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Iraq?...well you get the idea.

Though not perfect, as Canada continues to work to solve the problems of making it possible for people of every kind to live together in reasonable harmony and prosperity, we have a message for the world. The pressing problems of our global community are problems we're solving in Canada.

We UUs in Canada can become a catalyst for change. Unitarian Universalists can and should seek out leadership roles: locally, provincially, nationally, globally.

But first, let's start small, here on the North Shore, walking our talk.

I urge you to reflect upon the missing "U" and consider making it part of the NSU²C.