

Great Moments in Universalism: Young Hosea Ballou Converts!

— by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — Nov. 5, 2006 —

CHOIR ANTHEM

This We Know. The Earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.
This we know. All things are connected like the blood that unites one family.
All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of earth.
This we know. We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it.
Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. This we know.

—Attributed to Chief Noah Sealh, 1854; music by R. Jeffers

INTRO TO READING [Follows “This We Know” and Hymn #323 “Break Not the Circle”]

Our church belongs to a “movement of the love that frees.” We foster an inclusive circle that is growing wider still, embracing all the living. [References to the preceding hymn.] This may sound reasonable today, to us, but in fact it is still in great contrast with much of mainstream religion, which tends instead to separate people along exclusive sectarian lines, especially when concerned with distinctions between the saved and the unsaved.

Our religious identity is grounded in a deep and controversial heritage from the Universalist side of our twin names, a heritage forged largely by the dynamic and dedicated leadership of one early 19th century character, Hosea Ballou, whose story I continue to find formative, even essential to our liberal religious understanding. (Plus I just love to say his name, “Hosea Ballou.”) Universalism and Ballou state unequivocally that *all souls* are saved.

Meanwhile, the message presented moments ago by our choir draws on a statement attributed to Chief Noah Sealh, a contemporary of Hosea Ballou, although from the opposite side of the continent. His words begin, notably, with the phrase, “This we know...” Such an opening usually signals a declaration of some import, or at least of some strength. I think it is pertinent to ask of today’s UUs, how much can you say after an opening like this? I invite you—I *dare* you to continue that statement, “This I know...” adding your own understanding of religious clarity. Perhaps after today’s service you will have increased ability to do this.

The fellow in our focus this morning, Hosea Ballou, had great strength of articulation and became the leading advocate for Universalism, helping it to rise on the American religious landscape in the first half of the 19th century. He KNEW that all souls would be saved, universally.

In his time he needed to be strong, because he faced great resistance and even condemnation for his position. Yet so persuasive was his voice, that at his death in 1852 there were more Universalist congregations and many more individuals professing that faith than there are in our UUism today [Cassara, p. 151].

Something was really resonating back then, urged on by the loud and effective portrayals and defenses of the Universalist position by Father Ballou, as he fondly became known in his later years. But this significant player did not emerge in a vacuum, so to set the stage for the early Ballou story, we draw a reading from the eminent historian, Ernest Cassara (who is Professor Emeritus at nearby George Mason University, by the way).

After this short passage from Cassara's biography of Ballou, aptly called "The Challenge to Orthodoxy," the choir will sing words from another early 19th century contemporary, Theodore Parker, a great Unitarian minister, who was nearby Ballou and highly enamored of his influence.

READING

From *Hosea Ballou: The Challenge to Orthodoxy, A Biography*, by Ernest Cassara, Cambridge Cornerstone Press, 1961, 2003; pg. 9-10

The idea of universalism—that all [people] will be saved, and not only the elect—was not new in the history of Christianity. It had emerged briefly here and there in the church from the earliest times, the most notable exponent being Origen of Alexandria, the great third-century scholar and teacher. On the whole, however, universalism was rejected as contrary to the established belief in ever-lasting punishment for some of the human race. It was, in short, heretical.

In the eighteenth century, however, with the coming of the Enlightenment, the way was prepared for [a softening] of the harsher doctrines of Christianity. A more optimistic view of the nature of the Deity and of the possibilities for [humanity], both in this world and in the next, emerged in various parts of the church. The climate was now favorable for a reappearance of universalism.

Universalist ideas were first brought to the American colonies by various pietistic and mystical groups, such as the German Dunkers and the Schwenkfelders who settled in the liberal atmosphere of Pennsylvania. With these people universalism was incidental to other religious beliefs. Living among them, however, was Dr. George de Benneville, a physician and Universalist preacher, who came to America in 1741. Although De Benneville organized no churches, his preaching and publishing activities were credited with converting many persons to universalist views.

Universalism as a movement is dated from the landing of the Englishman John Murray on the New Jersey shore in 1770. A restless, active spirit, he traveled widely through the colonies preaching the message that all [people] will be saved. The orthodox clergy and many of their followers were convinced that Murray's doctrine was of the devil. Opposition to his activities arose wherever he went, and it often took violent forms.

...[But] Universalism was “in the air.” With the rise of the democratic spirit in the era of the [American] Revolution, it is not surprising that the Calvinistic belief in the election of some [people] to everlasting life and the condemnation of others to everlasting hell-fire for no apparent reason should be challenged. Universalist sentiments arose naturally among [those] who could not accept an aristocracy of the spirit any more than they could accept a political aristocracy.

CHOIR ANTHEM

Be Ours a Religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;

its temple, all space;

its shrine, the good heart;

its creed, all truth;

its ritual, works of love;

[its profession of faith, divine living.]

—*Theodore Parker (1810-1860), Unitarian minister; music by T. Benjamin*

SERMON: *Great Moments in Universalism: Young Hosea Ballou Converts!*

by Jaco B. ten Hove

Be Ours a Religion is a venerable hymn that draws on the sentiments of Theodore Parker, one of the more notable Boston Unitarian ministers of the mid-1800s (and quite infamous in his own right). He noted the power contained in “works of love,” which could unite his Unitarianism with the nearby Universalism, despite many other aspects that kept them apart until finally merging more than a century later in 1961.

But in the early 1800s, both these heretical strains of liberal Christianity were developing alongside each other, together with the newly liberated nation. Today I turn to the impressive growth of that era’s Universalist side of our twin heritage, a stirring chapter that offers indelible lessons, still. Join me on the journey to locate continuing relevance in our past, and let it deepen your own identity.

After the initial inroads made by deBenneville, Murray and a few others in the late 17th century [see prior reading], Hosea Ballou was the able horse on which Universalism would begin to gallop. Ordained in 1794, at age 23, Ballou was preaching right up until his death at age 81—six rich decades of unrelenting activity on behalf of his entirely loving God.

Shortly after the end of that influential life, Theodore Parker offered a tribute to Father Ballou, saying:

He went through the land proclaiming this great truth, and he has wrought a revolution in [our] thoughts and minds ... more mighty than any which has been accomplished during the same time by all the politicians in the nation [Cassara, p. 167].

Indeed, the “great truth” of Universalism was “in the air” and Hosea Ballou breathed great life into it.

In 2005, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Ballou’s most far-reaching book, called, *A Treatise on Atonement*, I preached about his inclusive theology, which could be called the first Unitarian Universalism.

Today I will concentrate on how his early years established in him the conviction and stamina that would sustain six decades of heretical advocacy, in the face of steady rebuke from more orthodox colleagues. I return again to this major historical figure because of the continued relevance of the material and the inspiration I derive from his story.

I can scarcely imagine what it must have been like, to pioneer so forcefully *and effectively* a radically positive theological notion that challenged the very heart of the dominant and often harsh Christianity of the time. *Our* time contains some stunningly similar challenges, and I wonder if we have the voice to also provide enough alternative vision to make a difference. So I take heart from Hosea Ballou—

—who was raised Baptist by devout parents from Rhode Island, where the Ballou family name was connected back to colonial times with Roger Williams, the original founder of that Baptist refuge. Hosea’s father was a farmer and preacher, who, with his wife and family, moved to the wilderness of Richmond, New Hampshire, a few years before their last of 11 children was born. That would be Hosea. They had little but the land, and wanted for much, but not for love.

However, his mother died before Hosea was two; it’s not hard to imagine the strains on her. Hosea grew up to form a deep bond with his father, who was typically stern but very kind

and devout, eking out a living from the farm while tending to his unpaid duties as local Baptist pastor. It is quite probable that Hosea's later commitment to God as a loving father figure took some root with his own paternal experience.

Education was entirely at home—there were no schools—and in the early years the family library consisted of just three items: a treasured Bible, which Hosea pored over, plus an old dictionary and a pamphlet about the tower of Babel. The youngest Ballou grew up tall and healthy and smart, with inclinations toward leadership, trusted by his friends.

With a Baptist preacher father, Hosea also became well versed in the Calvinist doctrine. As Ernest Cassara described it in his biography of Ballou:

He was taught that he, like all [people], had inherited the sin of the first parents of the race and had thus come into the world totally depraved. Because of this inheritance, the greater part of [humanity was] doomed to eternal misery after death. For an elect portion, however, things would be different, for God had provided a way in which they would be saved.

These fortunate ones, sometime during their lives, would feel the working of the Holy Spirit upon them: it would manifest itself in the ecstatic experience of conversion. But this experience would come to very few; it was the belief of the Baptists who surrounded Hosea that “not more than one in a thousand” would be chosen [Ibid, p. 8].

This was the water young Hosea swam in, but he also had an authentic inquisitive mind of his own, which at times brought his father up short. Once, upon considering how God would condemn all but “one in a thousand,” Hosea asked his father, hypothetically,

Suppose I had the skill and power (to create a being)—at the same time knowing that this creature of mine would suffer everlasting misery. Would (mine) be an act of goodness?

[Ibid, p. 8].

Lacking a reply from his shaken father, Hosea set about finding his own answers, and his gradual journey toward Universalism began. When he was about 10 years old, a noted traveling Universalist preacher had been controversially ordained there in Richmond, so he was vaguely acquainted with the idea of universal salvation.

However, he believed the virulent rejection of this heresy by Baptist authorities, who called it the “lowest sort of vileness...(for) what was to keep people on the straight and narrow path if the fear of hell were taken away? (Certainly a believer in Universalism) would lie, cheat, indulge in... and commit every possible sin” [Ibid, p. 10-11].

Nevertheless, the cursed doctrine of Universalism found its way into the extended Ballou family, which made it all the more intriguing to young Hosea, who was driven by intellectual curiosity and a free-ranging mind. He knew his Universalist relatives to be good people, who did not fit the despicable descriptions he had heard.

Nonetheless, as the good son of a preacher, he defended traditional Calvinist doctrine quite adequately against all Universalist mentions, and developed noticeable skill as a debater. But he still had nagging doubts, and his own logical arguments kept leading him to one of two conclusions: God either saves all people, or is partial to some—and that latter Calvinist concept just did not sit well in his growing soul.

Meanwhile, in 1789, a Baptist revival came to Richmond, which swept up the local populace in religious fervor and over 100 people felt the Holy Spirit call them into ecstatic conversion, including 17-year-old Hosea, who was immersed in river water in New Hampshire, in January.

This icy outer experience did not quiet the fire of his inner doubts, however.

I was much troubled in my mind because I thought I did not stand in fear of the divine wrath as I ought to [Ibid, p. 12].

So he redoubled his efforts to find answers to his quandary, digging into the Bible and anything else he could get, seeking ways to refute any possibly universalist interpretations. He sought some explanation for the apparent divine partiality that could be so unkind to so many. But increasingly he was hard put to avoid a Universalist conclusion.

His Baptist preacher father was not impressed with this pursuit, understandably, and after finding Hosea reading a book tainted with the Universalist heresy, he forbade any further such forays.

Soon, he saw his youngest son from a distance clearly with another book and inquired across the yard, “What are you reading there?” To which Hosea replied, respectfully,

“A universalist book.”

He put it down and walked away. The elder Ballou grumbled and went over to remove and destroy the dangerous tract. He was rather chagrined to find it was the Bible [Ibid, p. 12-13].

During the months after his baptism, Hosea pondered over passages such as in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, which seemed to tell that as much as Adam and Eve’s expulsion

from the Garden of Eden doomed everyone who followed, so did the witness of Jesus provide salvation for all—*all*, not just a few. Hosea read, in Romans, 5:18:

“Therefore, as by the offence of one, judgment came upon all to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all unto justification of life...” [King James Version]

Hosea asked of his devout older brother Stephen how this passage could be reconciled with any form of eternal punishment, so Stephen took him to see a certain Baptist preacher, named Elder Brown, hoping he could show how the Universalists were promoting falsehoods and thus urge Hosea to be more comfortable in their deeper Baptist ranks.

Elder Brown had a very strident air about him and confidently invited Hosea to point out a single text that leaned toward the reviled Universalism, so he could refute it. Hosea drew his attention to the passage he had recently been considering, Romans 5:18, saying he couldn't avoid the implication that it denied Calvinist interpretations of everlasting misery for some.

Historian Cassara described the ensuing scene thusly:

“Elder Brown immediately began to speak in a very loud voice, but he was not answering the question. When he stopped, Hosea observed that what he had said had nothing to do with the question. He pointed out that the ‘all’ who were condemned in the first part of the text were the same ‘all’ who were given justification (of life) as a free gift in the second part.

Elder Brown became confused and flustered, obviously angered by the young man's correction. He showed so much heat that those present found it discreet to end the ‘conference’” [Cassara, p. 13-14].

A string of such encounters that year finally led Hosea, now 18, to a second conversion, this time to accept the truth of universal salvation. His infinitely loving God was *not* partial and would bring *all* persons to a benign conclusion upon death. Hosea's older brother David had also begun preaching Universalism, and their father, to his credit, maintained the family unity by loving his sons nonetheless.

Hosea decided to dedicate his career to spreading the gospel, the “good news” of a “movement of the love that frees”—Universalism—which was forever affected by the conversion of this youthful dynamo into its realm. After carefully coming to his formative

convictions, for the next 60 years Ballou never wavered from his belief in the inherent goodness of God, and he said so, over and over again, loudly.

He could certainly expound on the positive attributes of this Universalist God, but by necessity he also became increasingly skilled at confronting arguments that rejected Universalism in favor of more traditional belief in future punishment, i.e., hell or purgatory. This issue was indeed the pivot point: is there or is there not some manner of divine retribution to come to sinners after death?

Ballou set as his life's work the rational promotion of an entirely loving God who would never doom anyone to eternal damnation. He determined, scripturally, that all people, upon the death of the body, are received immediately by divine power into a purified state, united with the godhead, as it were, in its total goodness.

All journeys short of this destination did not hold up under his reasoned scrutiny, so he rejected them and announced the logical conclusion of universal salvation. His conviction in the lack of *any* future punishment, a position that became known as Ultra-Universalism, was a step beyond where those who preceded him in this heresy had dared to go.

It was also an attractive beacon—for a certain portion of the population—and his audience grew steadily, as did the congregations of the fledgling Universalist movement. As did his family: he and wife Ruth raised nine children, two of whom went on to become Universalist preachers and the youngest helped found the Boston Globe newspaper.

But if theological things were as Ballou proposed, then there would be no need for some key pieces of the orthodox Christian system, which hinged on, even encouraged the fear of divine retribution. For a much larger portion of the population, this was too great a leap to take, given the pervasive orientation of emotionality and fear that so dominated the religious landscape.

And they often didn't demur quietly. Ballou had his hands full, regularly, with active, even vicious challenges. He summarized them with mild sarcasm thusly:

*What, no future judgment! Is there to be no distinction in the world to come between the righteous and the wicked? Are saints and sinners all to fare alike? Is it no matter then what we do? We may indulge without restraint in all manner of iniquity. We may neglect the duties of religion; lie, steal, defraud...and all is just as well. Nay, better: for who, were it not for the terrors of condemnation in a future state, would be at the expense and trouble of public worship and religious duties...? Such is the dust these enemies of the gospel throw into the air [H. Ballou, *Select Sermons*, p. 19-21, preached 1818; in Cassara, p. 107].*

Much of Ballou's success was due to how he could answer "dust" like this with both scripture testimony and commonsense illustrations. First, he would offer a quote from the Bible, such as Galatians, 6:7-8:

"Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption: but he that soweth to the spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting." Notice carefully; "he that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption." He must receive his wages from the master he serves; he must reap his harvest where he sows his seed [ibid].

In other words, in *this* life. Another important text was in Genesis (2:17), back to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve were told that if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would die. This was a warning about punishment in *this* life. There was no mention or record of any future price to be paid after death.

Ballou could note authoritatively all the subsequent sins catalogued in the Hebrew Scriptures, none of which were accompanied by any divine threats of everlasting damnation. He was equally adept at detailing how Jesus clearly expected any deserving retribution to come forth in this world. [Cassara, p. 138-9].

Such Biblical proofs that sin was addressed in this life only were a staple of his repertoire, and helped him assert that all projections of divine punishment beyond death were neither reasonable nor scripturally sound.

He could also appeal convincingly with more down-to-earth examples, to gain access to people's hearts. For instance (and I use his original pronouns here):

Your child has fallen into the mire, and its body and garments are defiled. You cleanse it and array it in clean robes. The query is, Do you love your child because you have washed it? or Did you wash it because you loved it? [Ibid, p. 150].

Unflinchingly, Ballou came down on the side of love, both human and divine. Therefore, all proponents of a God of even temporary condemnation after death were wrong to project human failing onto ultimate scenarios.

His approach to morality took sin seriously, but connected it indelibly with misery, not licentious happiness. Happiness comes with holiness, and God does not represent sin or misery.

It may be difficult for us today to realize what a “challenge to orthodoxy” all this was—and still is, I daresay. Think, if you will, about 21st century America, a large portion of which assumes the existence of a judging God and, therefore, hell. It may not come up in dinner conversation, but you probably know lots of people, including yourself, perhaps, who expect, maybe in a fuzzy sort of way, that somehow, ultimately, they will have to answer for their misbehaviors after they die.

Just last month, one national newsweekly’s cover story portrayed the results of a large survey showing that almost half of today’s Americans (47%) believe in a critical, authoritarian God who will “exact divine justice” and “punish the unfaithful.” [from *Time*, Oct. 30, 2006, p.50: *American Piety in the 21st Century*, the Baylor Religion Survey, Sept, 2006.]

This is fear talking. It is a dynamic familiar to us and to those in Ballou’s time. Again, a relevant quote from Scripture, launches the challenge. 1 John 4:18, in Ballou’s hands, is on target:

“Perfect love casts out fear...[Those] that feareth [are] not made perfect in love.”

You provide for your companions and your dependent offspring because you love them, and your duty is perfect delight. Can you honestly say, that you would not give your children bread when they are hungry, if you were not afraid of everlasting punishment hereafter?

Away with this deception. Let us learn to love God because he has first loved us. [H. Ballou, *Select Sermons*, p. 19-21, preached 1818; in Cassara, p. 108].

Hosea Ballou never shied away from an opportunity to show others the error of their interpretations, and he managed, where he could, to bring some wit into the endeavor. In his post as editor of the *Universalist Magazine*, complementary copies of which were sent all over the country, he once wrote about a rather creative, if pointed reply, he had received:

The following, which was returned on one of our Subscription Papers, from J. Shaw, Post Master, Bradleysville, SC, shows not only the bitter spirit of the opposition, but the profanity in which it is willing to indulge. (It is labeled as from) Infernal Pit.

“My Good Friend,—Continue as you have done widely to disseminate your very princely Magazine, and be assured that you shall shortly have one of the most exalted thrones among us. Yours with all the love of a Fiend, Nick Lucifer”

Reply: We have for a long time been of opinion that it was not necessary to go into the future world to find the infernal pit so much talked of, and we are now furnished with a demonstration of the correctness of this opinion; the above letter came by mail directly from that pit, where it appears there is a Post Office and a Post Master.

We have the satisfaction also to be certified that the Universalist Magazine does not please those who are in this infernal pit, for...the Magazine we sent there was sent back with the above letter; but it was not scorched, nor was the smell of fire or brimstone on it
[*Universalist Magazine*, II, pg. 163; in Cassara].

Lighter moments like this notwithstanding, Hosea Ballou's life work was to offer and face religious challenges of high order, pertaining to what mattered then—and still does: our human destiny. He believed in using his God-given reason to sort through spiritual claims, and he drew very close to the heart of things by articulating a radical affirmation of divine love for all, unequivocally, eternally. *This he knew.*

Would that I could say the benevolent God of Hosea Ballou has carried the day since then, but in our time, too, a hunger for the Universalist message, recast in new language, abides. Divisions, separations, conflicts still frustrate our hopes for unity and peace. Universal salvation can still be a beacon, if *we* give it strong, new voice.

And so we make a bridge with our love, to connect our needs today with the inspiration of inclusive pioneers like Father Ballou. We make a bridge to weave our works of love into the web of life. We make a bridge to join heart with heart and hand with hand, as called for in hymn #325, *Love Makes a Bridge...*