

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

by David Hicks MacPherson

I had a friend with whom I was raised whose family came from France. Like so many children in the neighborhood whose families came from other countries, he spoke his native language in his home and learned English later. He thought that because he knew French, the clever thing for him to do in high school was to take French as a foreign language. And he flunked.

There were reasons for that. I think there were some good reasons. But I tell you this story because I was raised in the Universalist church. I am part of the fifth generation on my mother's side of the family to have found, in the Universalist side of our Unitarian Universalist parentage, a home, a place of religious growth, of nurture, of development. And therefore I hope I will not flunk this morning in trying to tell you something about why we are celebrating the 200th anniversary of Universalism in the United States and Canada during this year of 1992-1993.

The celebration started with a marvelous singing, shouting service at the General Assembly in Calgary, in Alberta, Canada, this past June — a service I was privileged to attend. It was a fantastic service in which two of our ministers, Dave Johnson and Gene Navias, took a good bit of the history of Universalism in this country, from 1740-1840 approximately, and brought it down to a manageable size for us. Then they interspersed the whole with hymns from the different periods. They had a choir to back them up, and a brass ensemble, and a glorious organ, and well over a thousand people in that hall, singing, shouting, and cheering. At the General Assembly this coming June in Charlotte, North Carolina, the second part of the service will be held, celebrating our history from the 1840s to the 1950s.

Now in case you came in off the street for the first time, let's back up a bit. There are three things that I want to tell you this morning. It's good to start off the church year with a three-part sermon. We were always told in theological school, "If all else fails, turn to the three-part sermon!"

The three things I want to tell you a little bit about are where Universalism came from, what happened to it, and finally something about its future. I hope that many of our lay leaders and ministers will be telling this story in the coming year because, in all honesty, Universalism is the least known part of our heritage. John

Cummins is one of our ministers, who, like myself, was a Universalist before the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America in 1961. He wrote recently, "Universalism is perhaps the least understood dynamic in our Unitarian Universalist Association today, yet its message of hope and reconciliation transcends the partialisms of a fractured world and offers an ethic of universal liberation. We seek to empower our future through a new appreciation of Universalism for such a time as this."

Those last words then were taken as the theme for this year's celebration. You see the theme logo on the front of your program today.

But where did Universalism come from? Universalism came out of a desire on the part of human beings to feel that the universe was really not stacked against them.

If you go back just a few hundred years (which is mainly where we come from and what we're talking about), to the time of the Protestant Reformation, one of the chief reformers was a French theologian by the name of Calvin, John Calvin. It was John Calvin's type of theology that came to dominate the theology of a good many protestants, including those Puritans who helped to develop and dominate New England and part of the middle-Atlantic culture in the colonies.

Among Calvin's theological notions was the belief that before the beginning of time (before the beginning of time!) God had decided in God's infinite wisdom — which wisdom is not open to the understanding of human beings — that the majority of human beings should be condemned to be burned in eternity forever for the glorification of the minority, who, up in heaven, looked down on them in their writhing and suffering. Men and women and children were all condemned, in the main, to burn in the bowels of hell.

Now it is difficult for us today to understand the impact of that theology at a time when people did not have open to them competing sources of information that we have open to us today. But remember that there was no television, no movies, no radio, and very little communication across communities. If you can imagine spending your entire life within a 25-radius of the place in which you and your parents and your grandparents and your great-grandparents were born and raised, then you can begin to understand how millions of people could have been caught up in such utter, cruel, blasphemous nonsense.

And people were. When you, as a woman, suffered through bearing perhaps your fifth or your sixth or your tenth or your twelfth child, and saw that child die within hours, and recognized that, in all probability, the child's soul was now transported into the bowels of hell — not a limbo, not a purgatory, but outright hell — it must have been a tormenting thought. You can see the depression that gripped people. You can understand something now of the Salem witch trials of 1692, three hundred years ago.

(By the way, when I was raised in New England, the teachers used to tell us, "Now, be sure you inform people correctly that we never burned witches — we hanged them." I failed as a fifth- and sixth grader to understand the difference between burning and hanging, and the more I found out about hanging in those days the more I realized the difference was slight.)

But we are beginning now to understand something about the psychological factors, the sense of repression and horror, and its explosive nature in people who were just pent up and couldn't get out and couldn't understand the world. Into that world dominated by Calvin's type of theology came a few daring souls who dared to say, "That's a monstrous lie!"

It is unbelievable for us to recognize today what happened when the heresy of Universalism broke loose in this country two hundred years ago. Universalists were largely uneducated people. They were blue-collar class; they were farmers. They had some education — many of them could read and write enough and knew their numbers, their tables and such — but if they had more than a year of formal education they were lucky. It's amazing for us to see how this religion of hope, of universal salvation — salvation: health, well-being, wholeness, at-one-ment — how it spread through these classes of people!

In 1770, when John Murray landed and began his preaching, there were no formal Universalist churches at all. A few other preachers had left their Calvinist pulpits. In fact, the doctrine of universal salvation was a part of the theology of some German pietistic groups, such as the Schwenkfelders. But there were no organized Universalist congregations.

By the 1860s, there were over one thousand Universalist societies in the United States and Canada. The figure given today for the membership is 800,000, but I think that is nonsense. I don't think you can postulate an average membership of 800 per congregation. So many of these churches were in small towns and villages

that didn't have 800 people in them to begin with. But in the United States, which at that time had a population of around 31 million, a membership of maybe 250,000 or 300,000 or even 400,000, made Universalism a major faith.

It was a major faith, and it had a major impact because Universalists believed in the social application of their religion and because Universalists recognized that they were a liberating faith, a liberal faith. By the 1830s they were using that term "liberal religion," and they were proud of their inclusiveness. They were proud of their willingness to stand for social justice issues in communities all across the country.

Who were these people? Most of them you have never heard of and you never will because they were, in the main, average women and men. Maria Cook, back in 1815, was the first woman licensed as a Universalist preacher. Unfortunately, she was so harassed that she eventually left our ministry. But in 1863, Olympia Brown was ordained by the Universalists and stuck it out, and so became the forerunner of hundreds of women who have become Universalist ministers. She was a minister in Wisconsin, in Mukwonago and Racine, and did fantastic work for us. In 1916, in her eighties, she picketed the White House (there's film footage of that) because President Wilson wouldn't keep his promise to give women the vote.

There was Charles Spear, the Universalist minister who founded the *Prisoner's Friend* in 1830, so that the public would know what was going on in our criminal justice system at that time. And then there was that American about whom you have heard, a man who has been maligned from one end to the other: P. T. Barnum, who was such an active Universalist lay person, and who never said "There's a sucker born every minute." He did preach and teach the Universalist religion and had this to say about Universalism in the 1870s: "Universalism is the religion of democracy." He showed his lower-class background. He really believed in Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, as did so many of the Universalists. "Universalism is the religion of democracy. Its cardinal principles are the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. The world is going forward toward universal brotherhood or back to universal barbarism. If civilization is to endure, Universalism must become universal." That's the P. T. Barnum you never heard about.

And then there were others. Clara Barton, who you have heard about; Horace Greeley, whom some of you have heard about; the Pillsbury family in Minnesota; and three state governors named Washburn are some. Some of the Washburns' first names were relatively easy to pronounce. But that governor of Wisconsin had an

awful first name - Cadwallader. (How do you like that? And he's not the only person in that era who was given that name by presumably loving parents.) A general in the Civil War, he had a brother who was governor of Minnesota, and another brother who was governor of Maine, and one who ran for governor of California.

Down over the years, Universalism prospered during its first century of life, but its second century was not kind to it. When I was in theological school and I was supposed to do a thesis, I decided to study something of the history of Universalism. I researched my home state of Massachusetts from 1900-1950 to see what had happened to our churches. What I found out was unfortunately typical for Universalist churches in different parts of the country.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, both Unitarians and Universalists were on the way out. They were closing churches, losing members. They were dying institutions. Why were the Universalists dying? A principal reason was, unfortunately, an unwillingness to accept the liberal challenge and go with it. All of us who identify ourselves as religious liberals face the liberal challenge each and every day of our lives. What is it? In the aspect of which I wish to speak of it this morning it is this: Liberal religion implies the right of people to seek truth, to discover truth, and to live that truth. And because we are not clones, we must accept that we are going to see religious truth in different ways. Our challenge is to accept and embrace those different visions of the truth.

Universalism started off with that hope, but by the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, tried to "cop out" on it. They discovered that their children and grandchildren were coming up with all kinds of notions that seemed to them downright heretical. Imagine, liberal religious heretics calling others heretics! Like the pot calling the kettle black. They tried to remove the freedom clause from their statement of faith. They tried one minister for heresy — if you can believe it! — one of our ministers in Minnesota. And what was he accused of? He was accused of what you and I would call today being a naturalist, a religious humanist.

So the Universalists tried to stop the growth of liberal theological concepts. And I offer that to you as a warning.

Now, don't think I don't get nervous at times when I listen to some of your crazy ideas! But I was fortunate. I was fortunate in that I saw some of the adults who had raised me in my home church look at me as if I were some kind of an idiot stranger. How could I come to the notions that I came to? Well, I came to them

because I took what they said seriously, and you've come to yours because you took this religion seriously.

The Universalists of the mid-to-late 1800s were naive theologically. They were naive to suppose that humanity could be brought to peace and justice and freedom and love without a tremendous cost involved in it. Standing up in a pulpit and preaching "all souls will be saved" and singing hymns won't cut it — for a number of reasons.

They didn't understand stewardship. They understood something about stewardship, but they didn't really understand what it takes to build and maintain the institution of a church over generations. (And we have still to really understand that and take pride in it.)

They did not take their religion seriously enough. They did not prepare to go out and grapple in the world, to come back wounded and bleeding, to heal their wounds, and then to go back out again.

They did not know how to communicate their heritage to their children. They did not know how to say to their children, "This is first and primarily what you are as a human being: a religious liberal. And you should know that yours is a faith of hope and healing. It does not separate people into 'we the saved' and 'you the damned,' but tries to bring well-being to the whole diverse human family."

Lots and lots of Universalists hung in, and they hung in against all kinds of hopelessness and opposition, but their numbers became smaller and smaller, you could count the days until there would be no more Universalist churches, no more Unitarian churches. We seemed to be done and over with.

Well, what happened? The Unitarians and Universalists took on a new life after the second World War. The Unitarians got in on it first and did a better job of organization. The Unitarians and the Universalists finally, after struggling for a hundred and some years, got together at last and formed the Unitarian Universalist Association.

But what's been going on since then is no great thing for us to take uncritical pride in. We grew like crazy in the 1950s and early 1960s, and then lost 100,000 children, young people, and adults in the 1970s because we still didn't understand the precious thing we have. We don't understand how to live it and how to give it

in the way we should. The future needs us — if we will, for once, decide that we are worth giving to the world. But we have to understand who we are in order to give it.

We are a liberal, potentially liberating, faith. We are not something out on the fringe. We can't afford an attitude that finds Universalism interesting one day and unimportant the next.

This world is now becoming a global community — not a global village. It'll be quite a mix of urban, cosmopolitan, megalopolis, village, town, what have you. We are on the way right now, and we have been on the way since Magellan circumnavigated the globe.

And we are speeding up the process unbelievably. Our lives are influenced by all sorts of things happening everywhere in the world. But the formalized religions that still dominate the world are (forgive me, because I'm trying not to be offensive) outdated, terribly outdated. Their cosmologies speak of a time that you and I just don't understand at all. Their process of continuing to separate the sheep from the goats and demanding that everybody conform to creedal faiths is simply outdated. We've seen it, and we see it now. In our own country, and all over the globe, formal religion is in real dire straits today.

But people hold on to it in the belief that somehow it will take them back somewhere to some garden of Eden and somehow it will protect them from the fact that they are human beings, part of the human family. But they are going to have to work out their wants and their loves and their workaday lives, their family relationships, their economic status, and their sexual orientation. All of these things we are going to have to work out as a world community. That is the process in which we exist today.

Eventually no country on the face of the earth will be number one. And any country, including this one, that still teaches that we have to be number one over everybody else is dead wrong. This is partialistic. This is not Universalism. More and more Unitarian Universalists must understand that we are citizens of this globe. We are stewards for a time — for such a brief time — of this globe.

We don't really know what the future will bring, five and ten thousand years from now, but I ask you to think of this: Think of the fact that we as human beings are on the threshold of the human experience. We're only on the threshold. Within

four decades, I am reasonably certain that I will be dead and gone. Those four decades are not even a moment in the future of the human species.

What will make a difference to our future as a species is not a religion that is so arrogant that it believes it is the one and true religion. I'm not telling you that now. I'm asking you, however, to buy into the inclusive vision of our Universalist heritage, into this Unitarian Universalist meeting house, and into our continental association. But first of all I'm asking you to recognize that we must be Universalists. We must teach it; we must preach it, wherever we are — in our homes, in our factories, in our shops, in our shopping malls, with our politicians, wherever we go.

Look what we have tried to do — and we do not take pride enough in this yet — but we have struggled, and finally we are on the verge of accepting men and women as human beings. We are now on the verge of accepting heterosexuals and homosexuals as human beings. We are now on the verge of accepting all kinds of theological preferences within our Unitarian Universalist framework: theists and atheists and Christians and pagans and humanists and agnostics and naturalists and pantheists — all of us. All bound by the hope that this world is not a joke, that it is a place where humor exists and ought to exist — a wonderful, joyous place for all human beings with all their experiences. What's going on in India, what's going on in Yugoslavia, what's going on in Ireland, what's going on in the cities in the United States, in the riots and explosions, is part of the transitional process to a global community.

Clarence Russell Skinner, who was Dean at Tufts Theological School and influenced many Universalist ministers, said, "The only possible philosophy for a better world is universalism. It alone is realistic and creative. In it lies the hope of humankind. Without it we are doomed. It is the philosophy and the religion of the all-inclusive. It levels barriers, abjures prejudices, and renounces all that sets people against their fellows. This faith demands that the common humanity of all races be recognized."

Can we do it? Well, I think we can. But here's the secret. The doing has to be done here where we are. If Universalism is to become a force again and spread — so that it helps human beings who hate each other and despise each other and will kill each other at the drop of a hat to be able at last to see each other as human beings — we must begin here. We must begin to confront the real problems we face, the problems of population, the problems of poverty, the problems of education,

the problems of employment. If we are going to see and work through these things it's going to be because a force spreads that says, "Hey — you're a human being and nothing must stand in the way of that."

We have to begin by taking it seriously here because we have to use it seriously here. We must educate ourselves here to the tasks that await us outside. And it means that we must come back here often — to worship, to meditate, to ponder, to probe, to dialog — and then go back out.

A pamphlet is going to be produced on the two hundredth anniversary of Universalism and I had the opportunity to write something for it. I'll read that to close off now.

"While Universalism grew out of a Christian hope for salvation in an afterlife, its message has always carried an exacting challenge for this world. For example, it teaches that all people everywhere have the potential to overcome the brokenness within themselves and between each other. It charges us to be living evidence that in spite of all the horror that humanity has experienced in this century, that love can and will overcome such evils, that the human family can and will be made one and whole.

The old tribalisms, which have set people against each other and serve to create such hells on this earth as to make the visions of theologians weak and pale, are rampant once more. The ancient political and religious ideologies which keep on insisting that the world be separated into 'we saved' and 'they damned' are loose among us.

As the late Dean Clarence Russell Skinner once wrote, 'We need a profound revolution in the fundamentals of faith.' We need to feel, on the deepest possible level, that we are one family, and that we have one destiny within the whole earth. We need to get down beneath colors, classes, languages, economic systems, sexual orientations, national boundaries, and lifestyles to the fundamental fact that we grow only as we learn to enfold each other. That we find peace only as all people come into a universal sense of peace. That is, and always will be, what makes Universalism indispensable."