

WALKING MORE HUMBLY – AND THRIVING

Lecture 3 in the 2011–2012 Minns Lectures

What Was and Is Required:

Three Forums on the Renewal of Unitarian Universalism in the 21st Century

The Rev. John A. Buehrens

Delivered at Unity Temple (Unitarian Universalist), Oak Park, Illinois

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The Rev. Alan Taylor, Sr. Minister, Moderator

Respondents:

The Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Johnson-Doyle

The Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie

*What doth the Lord require of thee
but to do justly, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Micah 6:8

The Rev. Dr. Ritchie

Thank you, John, for your rich lecture, and thank you for this priceless opportunity to respond to John Buehrens on the subject of humility. I suspect that there are at least a couple of people who might like to be in my shoes tonight.

Although in your defense, I suspect there is something inherently self-contradictory in any clergyperson addressing this topic. I remember the story about the rabbi, who upon completing a sermon on humility, was moved to drop to his knees and pound his chest, shouting “forgive me, I am nothing.” The cantor on seeing this thought it might be a good idea to follow suit, so he too fell to the floor, and began to beat his chest and cry “I am nothing.” This prompted a regular member of the congregation to do the same, at which point the rabbi nudged the cantor and said, “Just look who thinks he is nothing now.”

I would like to begin this response by noting our broadest commonality. I too find myself in favor of more grace, more of the time. And I absolutely agree that whatever it is that it would mean for us to walk more humbly with God, some understanding of grace is an absolute prerequisite, and I too believe that this sense of grace might indeed liberate us from the unforgiving imperative – that is a part of our tradition for sure – to will ourselves into a state of

relentless spiritual, moral, and ethical progression. We have taken our desire for self-improvement to ludicrous and even cruel extremes.

It is my own suspicion of spiritual self-improvement that makes me, as far as I can tell, the only woman of my generation not to fall in love with [famous Unitarian] Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*. It is not that I was not attracted to the idea of a specifically feminine *bildungsroman*, and it is not that Jo was not a most excellent model for coming into age: it is that I found Mrs. March, with her religious obsession for self-improvement, to be one of the most terrifying mothers in all of American literature. Do you remember the scene where Jo seeks comfort from her mother after her sister Amy nearly drowns? Mrs. March turns that into an occasion to lecture to Jo about attending to better self-containment. As someone who grew up Unitarian Universalist, such grandiose personal expectations felt very familiar to me as a part of our religious inheritance, and also felt connected to the other mysteries in the novel, such as how it is one can only receive Christmas presents after one demonstrates one does not actually long for them, and how it is that the desperately poor Marches could spend Christmas "helping" the poor. If we Unitarians managed to escape understanding ourselves as "sinners in the hands of an angry god" we have often substituted that god with an equally tyrannical self.

As a historian I cannot help but notice that we have worried about this tendency towards moral perfectionism for a very long time. Indeed, we have been troubled by it for so long that I have to begin to suspect that the concern is not so much a critique of our identity as it is an expression of it. As far I can tell, the critique of our interest in self-improvement has existed side by side with that interest since the very origins of Unitarianism. I believe it was first voiced by Elizabeth Peabody, as a direct criticism of her dear mentor and friend, William Ellery Channing. It must have taken a lot for her to make the critique: Channing was a magical figure for her. She had met him first when she was still a young girl, and she would never forget how he reached across the barriers of gender and age and really saw and embraced her as a whole and intelligent being. She could hardly bear to differ with Channing on anything, and yet it was she who articulated the concern that Channing's concept of self-culture might actually be a form of self-torture. Yes, that is exactly as she described it: self-torture.

And so while I agree that "authentic humility does not mean mere self-effacement— much less being so self-critical as to miss seeing our real power, influence, or untapped potential," I do not

believe that our tendency towards self-criticism is one of the unhelpful expressions of self-culture. I think rather it actually serves to disrupt moral perfectionism and to open the doors to grace. I remember when I was doing my chaplaincy internship in peer group one day performing some complicated and heart-felt analysis on the theme of “things wrong with Unitarian Universalism.” Later that day my Lutheran minister friend Tom sought me out, assuming that my faith was utterly lost and I would need support. He was puzzled to find me beholden anew to Unitarian Universalism not in spite of my critique, but because of it. There are not many traditions where one is allowed to do such things, or where they are valued. And while I accept it might be tiresome to watch – I remember that one of Emerson’s complaints about Unitarianism was that it was discouraging to watch morbidly introspective people constantly stick knives into their own brains – I nonetheless believe that self-criticism performs a highly valuable personal and institutional function. In my years of service interviewing potential candidates for ministerial fellowship, my favorite question to ask was, “How has Unitarian Universalism failed you?” I feel those who understand our shortcomings and still love us and chose us are our surest guides to both humility and grace.

But perhaps we are not all that far apart after all, in that I suspect we do absolutely agree that humility and the appropriate valorization of our real strengths can and must exist side by side. The Kabbalistic tradition has much of interest to offer on this topic, including the story of the holy Simha Bunam of Pzssiska, who “used to carry two *kvittel* in his pockets,” on one of which he had written, “I am dust and ashes;” and on the other, “This entire world was created for my sake.”

The trick, of course, is knowing when to pull out which *kvittel*, and, I would argue, knowing who should turn more often to one *kvittel* than the other. And while I understand fatigue with political correctness, I cannot resist noting that in many ways finding the call to humility balancing is itself a sign of privilege. My friend the theologian Linda Mercandante has written in her book *Victims and Sinners* about how the original twelve-step Alcoholics Anonymous groups, most of them comprised of incredibly wealthy and successful men, heard the message that they were powerless over their addiction as contributing a much-needed equilibrium to their lives. While, on the other hand, when she attended a twelve-step program as an economically disenfranchised victim of domestic violence, the message of essential powerlessness was not as quite restorative.

Even so, I do agree that we need to make sure that we engage the powers that belong to us, even if their origins are in privileges of class and education. I have long thought that the best parts of historic Unitarianism and even Universalism might be understood as extensive reflections on the obligations and best uses of privilege. And we have accomplished the most in the way of social reform when we have understood our privileges and deployed them against the very norms that gave rise to them. One of my favorite examples of this was the Universalist women who worked for temperance, and here it might be helpful to remember that many expressions of the temperance movement were socially progressive concerns about the right of women to financial independence and domestic safety. For a while one of the strategies used by these women was to trade on the very deference showed them as middle- and upper-class white women. They would go to the saloons, and politely ask the owners if they could come in to pray. The owners, conditioned to politeness towards well-dressed ladies and the assumption that there is nothing particularly dangerous about women praying, would welcome them in. You would not believe how quickly the bars emptied of drinkers, however, once they were full of praying women.

One additional note on the intersections of privilege and anti-sectarianism. You quote William Ellery Channing that we should “flee the spirit of sectarianism as the spirit of hell.” Channing was certainly anti-sectarian. He refused to attend the local ministers’ association after the separation of Unitarianism from the Congregational church because many of the other clergy were interested in defining themselves as within the specificity of “Unitarianism.” Indeed, intimates to the Channing home report that Channing avoided using the “U” word at all costs in all settings. Yet it strikes me that the sectarianism that you seek to avoid is far different than that which he avoided. The sectarianism that Channing eschewed was the sort that he and many of his circle found “vulgar,” and they used that specific word a lot. Their concern for sectarianism was not that it would drive people away from our congregations, but that it would cause the wrong sort of people to come in. For them it was the equivalent of trading in the First Parish Church on the village green with its inheritance as the flowering of centuries of New England culture for something crassly newfangled. I recall the refined hostess in William James’ novel *The Bostonians* who asks a visitor his religion, and upon learning it is Unitarianism, destroys him socially by simply saying, “Oh, something *new*.” While your version of avoiding sectarianism is a welcoming expression of humility, it really has not been that for most of our

history, and for that reason I would love to hear even more about why you are convinced of its inclusive power.

I was also very interested in your observation that the Unitarians of the golden era founded so many institutions and good works, all without putting their names on them, whether those names were of family or sect. It brought to mind a study I recently read on Jewish philanthropy, by the folklorist Amy Shuman. One of the many things that she discovered was that Jewish philanthropists clearly favored putting their family names to the institutions they fund, even as they also subscribed to the moral philosophy of Maimonides, which very clearly prioritizes the value of doing good works anonymously. But they had come to realize that attaching family names to institutions had the effect of attracting other donors, and that for them became the higher value. And it appears that the attraction of a name is not by way of personal testimony, in other words it is not that other donors contributed because they necessarily had such trust in the named family. It is more that the very distinctiveness of a name lent the institution a kind of specificity, and gave location to something that might otherwise not have been cognitively mapped. I wonder if we don't need to continue to be specific about Unitarian Universalism, for that very reason.

So I am not sure if you will be able to enjoy this next compliment given your concern for sectarianism, but I mean it most sincerely. One of the most powerful aspects of your lecture is your quite profound ability to succinctly and accurately describe Unitarian Universalism. I will confess that I leaked a copy of your lecture earlier this week to a friend (sorry! Like you say, we UUs like to break rules!), who saw in it a path to her elevator speech on what is Unitarian Universalism. As you wrote: "We simply find common ground in the human spirit and its needs, not in ideologies, isms, and abstractions; at least at our best." May it be so indeed.