

Forum on Faith: Universalist outlook shapes our vision

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In the 1950s, when people often assumed everyone went to a church or synagogue, my militantly unchurched father-in-law was admitted to a [Manhattan hospital](#).

Tired of the raised eyebrows and cold stares that accompanied an assertion of "no religious preference," he decided, when asked about his affiliation, to make something up. He told the admissions clerk he was a "universalist," and this was duly noted on his hospital record.

Imagine his surprise a few days later when a minister walked into his room for a visit, introducing himself as a Universalist. My father-in-law quickly dismissed the man, saying he wasn't interested in religion, and the minister graciously withdrew.

My father-in-law was hardly alone in not knowing about the homegrown American tradition of Universalism. Brought to North America in the 1700s by an English preacher, [John Murray](#), the [Universalist Church of America](#) quickly took root and flourished, especially in New England and New York State.

By the mid-20th century, however, it had dwindled to a small, financially struggling, denomination. In 1961, it disappeared as a separate body, merging with the larger [American Unitarian Association](#) to become part of what we now know as Unitarian Universalism.

Nevertheless, Universalism continues to stand for a powerful idea. Its central doctrine, universal salvation, holds that God's love embraces everyone, without exception. In the end, all people -- not just an "elect" few -- will be saved.

Universalist doctrine was based not on a belief in human perfectibility (that was more the province of Unitarians), but on faith in God's infinite love. The early Universalists found it inconceivable that a loving God would condemn anyone to eternal punishment.

Thomas King, the first minister of the [Universalist Society of Danbury](#), put it this way:

"The basis of Universalism is the nature of the blessed God. It recognizes the impartial and unchangeable love of our heavenly Father, and its grand moral design is to assimilate humans to the likeness of their maker."

That early Universalist society was founded in Danbury in 1822, when 12 individuals gathered for worship and signed a charter. The first services took place in the schoolhouse on Great Plain, and later in the Danbury courthouse.

In those days being a Universalist was not without risk. Some members of other churches deemed Universalist belief "a censurable heresy." Those who embraced it faced discrimination and excommunication. Universalist preachers, including John Murray, were sometimes pelted with eggs and rocks.

It's no wonder, then, that at least one founding member in Danbury attended the first meetings fearful for his safety, "going across the swamp to the court-house in order not to be seen."

But the good news proclaimed there impressed and heartened him. Soon, he was "no more ashamed -- but proud -- to be seen going to the Universalist meetings."

Over time, Universalism became less of a threat and even part of the establishment. The Danbury Universalists moved to 347 Main St. in 1893, and worshipped there until 1967.

Nationally, faith in God's universal love fueled a passion for universal justice. Universalists became involved in movements for women's equality and prison reform, and for the abolition of slavery and capital punishment.

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury is the direct descendant of those early Universalists. Some of its members continue to profess, as John Murray did, "the kindness and everlasting love of God." Others are more comfortable with humanistic language. Either way, a Universalist outlook continues to shape the Danbury congregation's vision.

The congregation welcomes everyone, regardless of religious belief, as long as they "respect the inherent worth and dignity of each person." This respect for human dignity leads its members to feed the hungry, to support community organizations, and to work for immigrants' rights, marriage equality, and a sustainable Earth.

This Sunday's services in Danbury are dedicated to "Re-imagining Valentine's Day," in conjunction with "National Standing on the Side of Love Day," an initiative of the [Unitarian Universalist Association](#).

Together, we'll consider the power of love in the public square -- how it offers hospitality to those who have been excluded, helps us triumph over fear and dehumanization, and ultimately transforms communities. I like to think that our Universalist ancestors would approve.

This Valentine's Day, whatever your religious faith, I invite you to consider how you, in your own unique way, might extend your love beyond your immediate circle of friends and family. What will you do to "stand on the side of love?"

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