

THE SOURCES SUPPER **A Celebration of Our Unitarian Universalist Heritage**

Introductions

Leader: Welcome to the Sources Supper. We'll start with introductions. We'll be getting to know one another more during the ritual, so for now we'll just do very brief introductions. Two questions: What's your name, and how long you have been connected to this congregation? Who would like to start and then we'll go around the group clockwise.

Orientation

Leader: Tonight we gather to remember the origins (or sources) of our religious tradition. We'll sit together and tell four stories before dinner – two stories from Europe and two from America – and talk about how they speak to us today. There will be questions for reflection and sharing. There will be songs to bring our voices together. And since this is our story, we'll share the reading of the stories. Then we'll have a simple meal and see where the conversation leads us. After the meal there will be two final stories and a brief ending ritual.

We hope this Sources Supper helps us better understand our spiritual ancestors, reframing their stories to make them our own. We hope to find inspiration for our spiritual journeys—from the stories and from one other. For in telling the stories of our past, we become who we truly are as a people. And when shared, our individual stories become part of our collective journey.

We begin, as always, by lighting a chalice, and tonight, we'll also sing "Gathered Here."

Song: Gathered Here

*Gathered here in the mystery of the hour
Gathered here in one strong body
Gathered here in the struggle and the power
Spirit draw near*

PROLOGUE

Leader: This is the story of how Unitarian Universalism came into the world. Today we are a religious movement committed to human dignity, social justice, and spiritual searching without final answers to the big questions of life. But we have a history and tradition that go back nearly 400 years in Europe and over 200 years in North America, to worlds very different from our own. Few of us today hold the same religious beliefs as the founders, but they are our spiritual ancestors. Our roots are in liberal Christianity, in the words and deeds of radical Protestant reformers. Please join me responsively:

Leader: We are heirs to an amazing heritage of personal and theological courage

All: To speak the unpopular truth

L: To oppose religious orthodoxies

A: *To listen to science and history*

L: To make our world more just

A: *And to never stop challenging ourselves to grow spiritually—wherever that leads us. It's a story of pushing back with courage and being transformed by many sources of revelation.*

Leader: The founding stories of Unitarianism and Universalism are our stories. They speak to us today if we tune our ears not so much to the words, which are often foreign, but to the music, which can touch our hearts and inspire us on our own spiritual journeys. Let's begin with the story of Michael Servetus. We'll go around the group with each of us reading a paragraph at a time. We will all stumble on words from time to time, and that's okay. Feel free to pass if you'd prefer not to read tonight. I'll begin with the first paragraph of the Servetus story and then we can read from my left around the group.

MICHAEL SERVETUS

It's five hundred years ago and a small invention is changing the world. Until now, most people learned about the larger world only from what others told them, not from what they could learn on their own by—reading! Yes, before the printing press, books had to be written by hand, word-by-word, which made them so rare and so expensive that only churches and rich people could own them. In the Christian world only a small number of people, mostly priests, could read the bible in Latin, and hardly anyone could read the bible in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek. Knowledge was in the hands of the few, who told everyone else what was true and false.

Born in Spain, Michael was a child genius who learned six languages by the time he was 13. One of those languages—Hebrew—was forbidden to learn, because the church wanted to protect its own interpretation of this important book. But Michael ignored these rules; he was hungry for knowledge and had many questions he wanted to answer. He even learned Arabic because he knew that people other than Christians had important things to teach him. And when as a young man he traveled around Europe, he was shocked by the wealth and corruption of the Church. He felt strongly that a church that had lost its way with too much power and dishonesty could not be trusted in its religious teachings.

When Michael Servetus read the bible in its original languages, he saw different things than the Church taught. His biggest discovery was that the main doctrine of the Church—the Trinity, the idea that God has three equal persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—was not in the bible. Losing the oneness of God not only undermined Christianity; it unnecessarily divided Christians from Jews and Muslims. Servetus wrote that the prophet Mohammed, despite a great reverence for Jesus, dissented from Christianity because of the Trinity, an outcome that was “truly an unfortunate tragedy for the world.”

Servetus naively thought that Church leaders would welcome conversation and debate. Instead he got into big trouble with both Catholics and Protestants who searched for him all over Europe after he went into hiding and took another name. But that did not stop Michael from speaking and writing about what he had learned from reading the Bible for himself, and from becoming what one of his biographers called “a total heretic,” the most radical theologian of the Reformation era.

Michael Servetus lived in a time when standing up to church leaders like John Calvin was a serious act of courage. On October 27, 1553 Servetus was killed for his convictions, burned at the stake with his beloved book, *The Restoration of Christianity*, strapped to his body.

Historians think that the main influence of Michael Servetus came from his death for religious convictions, because a number of fair-minded people in Europe were horrified that this good man, who had committed no crimes, was killed by a government for speaking his mind about religion. His death stirred the beginning of a movement away from government executing people for their religious beliefs.

Michael Servetus lived just before Unitarianism was founded, but he became a hero to future Unitarians. He was our first martyr, a man who lived by reason as well as faith, an audacious thinker and yet eager for dialogue, and who in the end was not afraid to speak truth to power, even unto death.

BRIEF PAUSE FOR REFLECTION (about 30 seconds)

REFLECTING TOGETHER

Leader: In many ways, it was reading a book—the Bible—that transformed Servetus. He engaged this book with his mind and heart, and his life was changed. We Unitarian Universalists are people of books, and many of us have been changed by encountering key books at important moments in our lives. Let's take a moment to reflect on a book that was a source of revelation in our personal lives. Can you think of a book that affected you deeply, that opened you to new ways of thinking and being in the world? It may have been a novel, a poem, a nonfiction work, a religious book, or even words put to song. It may be well known or only important to you. Take a moment of silence to identify that book (or poem or song) and think about how it affected you.

[Silent reflection for about one minute]

Please turn to someone in the group (preferably someone you did not come with today) and share your book and how it affected you. Let's give this about four minutes.

[Sharing in twos]

Let's get back together. Tonight we will use a "talking stick" format (without the stick) for sharing in the whole group. This means that each person shares and the rest of the group listens without cross talk. There is no expectation that everyone will share, just those who care to. Who would like to begin with your book and how it affected you?

[Sharing with the whole group (7-10 minutes)]

Leader: To close this first story of our European origins, let us remember as we read together:

Our Unitarian Universalist ancestors were not satisfied to have the Church interpret the Bible to them; they insisted on reading Scripture directly—often in the original languages—and on interpreting for themselves.

So are we called to read and interpret the works we call holy for ourselves.

Leader: We move now to the story of the birth of Unitarianism in Europe. Let's pick up with the next reader.

UNITARIANISM AND THE BIRTH OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN EUROPE

It was 18 years after Michael Servetus died and religious conflicts were breaking out all over Europe between Protestants and Catholics and among Protestants themselves. In the little kingdom of Transylvania, which today is part of Romania, our story begins with the young Queen Isabella. Through her extraordinary mother Queen Bona of Poland, Isabella had close ties to the Italian humanists and the Muslim Ottoman Empire. From both sources, Isabella learned the value of religious tolerance. In 1558, she was the first ruler in Europe to issue an edict of universal toleration, with the state imposing no creed on the people.

Isabella raised her son, John Sigismund, to carry the banner of religious tolerance when he became king. He called for a great debate among the Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics, and newest religion—the Unitarians—thinking that reasoned argument would convince him and everyone else of the best path. Well, that passionate debate lasted for 10 days and was as popular among ordinary people then as the Super Bowl is today. Most people agreed that a smart and eloquent Unitarian named Francis David won the debate. King John decided to become a Unitarian.

Then something amazing happened: for the first time in the history of Christianity, a king who changed religions did not require his subjects to follow him. Instead, under the influence of Francis David, King John Sigismund issued the Edict of Torda, the famous Declaration of Religious Tolerance. The date was January 10, 1568. Here is what it said:

“ . . . In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, good; if not, no one shall compel them, for their souls would not be satisfied. . . . Therefore, none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone. . . . and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God.”

Religious tolerance—this is the cornerstone of our legacy as Unitarian Universalists. This kind of tolerance is more than just “live and let live,” or freedom to practice one's religion, or even separation of church and state. Our tradition goes deeper by saying that freedom of conscience is the very heart of the spiritual life; people must come freely to their beliefs or their souls will not be satisfied.

But tolerance is fragile in our world. King John died a few years after the Edict of Torda and the next king tried to narrow the reforms. Francis David, the dynamic founder of Unitarianism in Europe, began to violate a law against “innovation” in theological matters by teaching that we should not pray directly to Jesus because Jesus was a human being and not God. David was prosecuted by a fellow Unitarian leader who thought that he was moving too fast and thus politically endangering the new Unitarian movement. David was sentenced to life in prison and died within a year. Inscribed on the wall of his cell were these words: “Neither the sword of popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death—nothing will halt the march of truth. I wrote what I felt, and that is what I preached with trusting spirit.”

BRIEF PAUSE FOR REFLECTION (about 30 seconds)

Leader: The Edict of Torda governed that part of Europe for many years, but the darkness of religious intolerance eventually returned. In our time, we face religious intolerance in many places in the world, and the truth be told, even in our own hearts.

Let's take a moment to reflect on the places in our world today where religious intolerance is a source of oppression for people. When you are ready, just call out the place and the situation. After each example of intolerance is called out, we can echo the words of the Edict of Torda: "No one shall compel them, for their souls will not be satisfied."

[Silent Reflection for about 30 seconds]

Who would like to start with a place in the world and the kind of religious intolerance?

[Each followed by: "No one shall compel them, for their souls will not be satisfied."]

To close this second story of our European origins, let us remember as we read together:

Our ancestors, insisting on the right of each individual to follow his or her spiritual path left behind the comfort of religious homogeneity.

So we are called to hold to our individual faith as we value religious pluralism.

Let's now sing a song that speaks beautifully to the theme of religious pluralism.

Song: "This Is My Song"

*This is my song, O God of all the nations
A song of peace, for lands afar and mine
This is my home, the country where my heart is
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine,
But other lands have sunlight too, and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine
O hear my song, thou God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine*

Leader: Our third story is the American birth of Unitarianism. Let's continue with the next reader.

THE AMERICAN BIRTH OF UNITARIANISM

During the 1770s in North America the rebellion against England was underway and a new democratic nation was being born. A religious revolution was underway too, and our Unitarian and Universalist forbearers were in the lead. This struggle was not just about religious doctrines—it was about what it means to be a human being.

Are we born evil or good? Is our human intelligence a false idol or a reliable guide to what is true and false—in religion as well as science? Do we need kings and theologians to tell us what to believe and how to live in religious community, or should *we the people* govern ourselves in religion as we do in politics? These were the key questions of the American religious revolution. And an American Unitarian, William Ellery Channing, was one of its first great leaders.

Channing liked to tell a tale from his childhood. Once, his father took him to hear a traveling preacher whose fiery sermon predicted God would soon destroy this evil world. Folks were urged to pray fervently and prepare for the end, because that was the only way they would be spared the fires of hell. William was frightened, but a small voice inside him doubted the preacher's words. After the sermon, he looked to see how his father was reacting. To William's dismay, his father told friends that he liked the sermon and its message.

On the way home, William was filled with dread about what might happen to him and his family. But his father began whistling in the carriage as if nothing was wrong. The family had a quiet dinner and afterwards his father relaxed with his pipe and newspaper in front of the fire.

Watching his father, young William came to realize something that would stay with him for the rest of his life. It was this: Even when people say something is true, they may not really *mean* it. Watch how people *act* and you will see what they really *mean* by their words. William's father had *said* he agreed with the preacher's ideas about a violent, angry God, but he *acted* as if everything was okay. This told William that his father did not really think that God was about to destroy the world. William had been right to doubt the preacher. He came to believe that we should listen carefully to what others say about religion but make up our own minds. Unitarians have always taken this idea very seriously.

Channing was educated at Harvard and served most of his life as a minister in Boston. He and his fellow religious liberals taught three radical ideas that brought strong opposition from more conservative ministers. Please read them with me:

We human beings are basically smart and good, not ignorant and evil.

We must respect those who have different religious beliefs and practices.

We must read the bible with an eye to when it was written and how it was written.

These ideas, familiar to us now, were powerful and challenging in the religious world of the time—like the ideas behind American democracy. Many religious leaders felt threatened. Unitarians were not yet an organized movement, but soon they were forced to become one.

In fact, the name “Unitarian” was first given to this American-born movement by critics who wanted to tarnish religious liberals with the label given to European Unitarian heretics. When the liberal Christian leaders decided to fight back, they asked William Ellery Channing to make

the case that American Unitarianism actually represented true Christianity. Though reluctant to stir up controversy, Channing obliged in a famous sermon given in Baltimore on May 5, 1819.

Titled “Unitarian Christianity,” this sermon was a phenomenon. It not only stirred the audience, but the published text electrified the nation. Historians say that it was the most widely published and debated document in North America since the American Revolution. Its language is foreign to us nowadays, and it refers to controversies that differ from our own, but it was a potent statement, alarming to many and inspiring to many others. Does this sound like how others respond to our religious movement today—alarmed or inspired?

Here are two brief excerpts from what became known as Channing’s “Baltimore Sermon”:

“Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings. We may let [reason] sleep, but we do so at our peril.”

“The bible refers to the times in which it was written, to modes of thinking, to controversies in the church, to feelings and usages which have passed away. No book demands more exercise of reason than the bible.”

Like other great leaders in our Unitarian Universalist tradition, Channing remained open to new revelations throughout his life. In the decades after the Baltimore Sermon, he wrote one of the first attacks on the institution of slavery by an established church leader. Deeply spiritual as well as a rational thinker, Channing inspired the younger radicals of his day with the transformative idea that “we see God around us, because he dwells within us.” To Channing, we are “like unto God.”

With his preaching and writings, and especially his Baltimore Sermon, William Channing defined a religious movement—Unitarianism—based on a new view of human nature that required a new way to think about religion. It was a religion fit for a new American democracy, a religion for a free people.

BRIEF PAUSE FOR REFLECTION (about 30 seconds)

REFLECTING TOGETHER

Leader: Let’s imagine that Channing visited us today and wondered how his core insight about faith and reason is playing out with contemporary Unitarian Universalists. He would find that most Unitarian Universalists have no trouble with the “reason” part of the equation: we are all humanists nowadays in the sense that we believe that science and other forms of human knowledge are important guides in religion. There are not many creationists in our midst.

But we do differ, sometimes vigorously, about the role of faith, which for purposes of this conversation means the realm of God, prayer, grace, and what is now called “the language of reverence.”

Here is a question to reflect on and discuss. The next reader can read it to us.

[Next reader]: At this point in your spiritual journey, how far do you go in using traditional religious language to describe your religious experience or beliefs? Perhaps you are not comfortable with any traditional terms such as God, prayer, grace, or revelation because they

have too much historical baggage. Perhaps you use this kind of language freely. Or maybe you fall somewhere in between these two poles. Where is your comfort zone, and when do you get outside it? Even if you have no personal struggles in this area, you can reflect on the challenge for Unitarian Universalist congregations where we must deal with our differences on this core issue of religious language.

Leader: Let's take a moment for personal reflection and then we'll share in small groups.

[Silent reflection for about one minute]

OK, let's take about seven minutes to discuss this in groups of three. (It might be good to form a group with people you didn't pair up with last time.) This is a big topic, and we'll have to be brief for now. There will be time over dinner for more conversation.

[Sharing in groups of three for seven minutes]

[Afterwards]

Would someone like to share your thoughts with the group? Remember that we are using the talking stick format for sharing in the whole group.

[Sharing with the group—about five minutes]

To close our story of the origins of American Unitarianism, let us remember as we read together:

Our ancestors, rejecting the notion that human beings are depraved, affirmed the goodness of human nature and the potential of human reason.

So we are called to affirm the worth and dignity of each person.

We turn now to the story of the American birth of Universalism. We pick up with the next reader.

THE AMERICAN BIRTH OF UNIVERSALISM

There was another radical religious idea floating around at the time of the American Revolution: universalism, the odd notion that God loves all people and will save them all in the end rather than punishing anyone with hell. At least it was odd to Calvinist Christians, who believed that God picked favorites, deciding in advance who will be saved and who will be damned.

And it was odd to most other Christians, who believed God eternally rewarded those who lived a good life and eternally punished those who didn't. Why be good if there is no punishment after you die? Why be a Christian if non-believers are also saved through Christ's life and death? These were disturbing questions, and even Channing and the other early Unitarians rejected universalism as going too far.

The idea of universal salvation—that heaven is for everyone--had been around in Christianity since the early centuries, but church leaders kept fighting it. It was brought back in Europe in the 18th century and found its way to North America and to the home of Thomas Potter in Good Luck, New Jersey. (Yes, that's a real name.) After ten years of leading discussions in his own house, Potter wanted to start a local church based on the idea of universal salvation. He never found a preacher to teach it; the idea was just too radical.

Meanwhile in England a young Methodist minister named John Murray had been making a name for himself as a preacher. But he had also just been fired for his growing belief in the truth of universalism. And tragically, he had lost his infant son and wife to illness. Depressed and penniless, he decided to give up the ministry and start a new life in America. He left for New York on a ship named "Hand in Hand," but the ship ran aground on a sand bar near, you guessed it, Good Luck, New Jersey.

Fate – and bad weather – had brought Potter and Murray together. "The wind will never change, sir," Potter told Murray, "until you have delivered to us, a message from God."

Murray did preach the following Sunday, September 30, 1770, a date that now marks the founding of the Universalist Church in America. And as he finished, the wind did change. Though Murray sailed on to New York, he soon returned to Good Luck and Thomas Potter. He preached there for several years before moving to New England and founding the denomination of Universalism.

John Murray and the next great Universalist leader, Hosea Ballou, were extraordinary preachers but not highly educated like Channing and the Harvard Unitarians. Their message, based on a new look at the bible, appealed to rural and working class people who were drawn to the wonderfully affirming message that God loves you, you are saved—now get on with living a good life and making the world better.

Unlike Unitarians who were content at first to stay close to New England, the Universalists sent missionaries to far away places like Minnesota and California. John Murray gave missionaries their marching orders. Let's read it together:

Go out to the highways and byways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision.

You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men. Give them, not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

Leader: Fitting Murray's charge to the missionaries is the song "This Little Light of Mine."

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine*

*Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine
[Repeat]*

*Building up a world, I'm gonna let it shine
[Repeat]*

[Next reader] But the optimistic Universalists faced ugly opposition. Most Christians thought Universalism undermined Christianity's core doctrine: that believing in Christ and avoiding sin promised us eternal life. Murray was nearly driven out of Gloucester, Massachusetts where he had settled. Some even tried to ban Universalists from public service, including juries and political office, as a threat to public morality. (No hell? Let's party!). The Unitarians with their optimistic view of human nature were bad enough, but these Universalists with their notion of an infinitely loving God were going way too far.

It turned out that Universalism was more in tune with the spirit of the new American democracy than were its pessimistic opponents. Calvinist teaching faded. But Universalist ideas not only brought us a new denomination—they profoundly shaped modern liberal religion.

Leader: Please read these core Universalist ideas with me:

*We are loved in this world.
We are called to respect and love others—all others.
We are called to bring justice to a broken world.*

BRIEF PAUSE FOR REFLECTION (about 30 seconds)

REFLECTING TOGETHER

Leader: In today's world, there are two challenging parts of the early Universalist message. What do we make nowadays of the ideas of salvation and God's unconditional love? And how do we respect and love those we differ with fundamentally about how our society and government should function?

Let's take time to reflect on some questions that early Universalist leaders like Murray and Ballou might want to ask us today if they came to visit.

Pick the ONE question that most fits for you. Let's continue around the group reading each question.

1. What people or group might we individually (as Universalists) commit ourselves to loving and respecting more, even while opposing their views or actions? This question sometimes leads to a focus on what we don't like about other groups. Try to turn the question into the spiritual challenge we face in learning to respect the inherent worth and dignity of those we differ with strongly. Perhaps there is an experience from your past when you overcame internal barriers to respecting a group of people who were different, strange, or threatening. What resources did you draw on?
2. Does the idea or metaphor of God's unconditional love mean something to you in your life today? Perhaps it's a traditional religious meaning or something quite different.
3. Does the idea or metaphor of salvation mean something to you in your life today? Again, maybe it's a traditional meaning or something very different.

Leader: Let's take a moment for personal reflection, after which we will divide into small groups around each question.

[Silent reflection for about one minute]

Now you can go to different parts of the room (or to different rooms) according to which question you want to discuss. Let's give this 10 minutes.

[Sharing in small Groups]

[Back together after 10 minutes]

Leader: Would anyone like to share something of what your group discussed? We'll use the same format of sharing and listening.

[Sharing With the Group—about five minutes]

Leader: To close our story of our Universalist origins, let us remember as we read together:

Our spiritual ancestors, rejecting the notions of predestination and hell, believed that all people—regardless of belief, regardless of shortcomings—are ultimately saved.

So we are called to witness that of the Holy in each person.

Leader: Never a people to rest very long after big religious breakthroughs, our ancestors were soon experimenting with the radical new philosophy of Transcendentalism. We'll tell that story after dinner, followed by the 20th century story of religious humanism. During dinner we can talk about what we are sharing tonight or anything else we like.

[Break for dinner—about 30 minutes. We suggest there be a blessing before dinner.]
[The final two stories and the postlude are generally read around the table, followed by dessert.]

Two potential meal blessings to be read by the leader or someone else when the group is gathered at the table:

1. We give thanks for being.
We give thanks for being here.
We give thanks for being there together
(Unity Church-Unitarian's Wellspring Wednesday blessing)
2. Let us give thanks for all of the blessings in our lives, for the food that nourishes us, and for the interdependent web of life that sustains us. May we find the grace each day to face whatever life may bring us, to remember those in need, to see the world through eyes of love and gratitude, and to respond by caring for one another, creating beauty, and working for justice in the world. May blessings be upon us all. Amen.
(Nathan Woodliff-Stanley, UU Minister)

THE TRANSCENDENTALIST TURN

Leader: After Channing's Baltimore Sermon, Unitarians settled into two decades of consolidation, growing in members and congregations, an important but no longer radical Christian denomination. Then the young minister Ralph Waldo Emerson shook the Unitarian world when he delivered his Harvard Divinity School Address on July 15, 1838. Transcendentalism entered liberal religion, and we are its descendants. *[Start again around the group.]*

Just when traditional Unitarians of the time were making headway with rational thought in religion, along came Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists to say that personal inspiration and intuition, not rational thought, are the cornerstone of religion.

Just when liberal theologians were focusing on the miracles of Jesus as proof of a supernatural God who intervenes in the world, Transcendentalists replied that human life itself is the miracle and that God is found within each of us.

Just when Harvard Unitarians were making the case for being the real, true form of Christianity, Emerson and Theodore Parker, who studied the world's religions, took Christianity off its pedestal as the only path towards God. Unlike earlier reform movements that wanted to restore Christianity to its original roots, Transcendentalists said that religion is bigger than Christianity, and it resides in the soul of each of us.

Unitarianism never recovered from the shock of Transcendentalism and its three main ideas: God is within, Christianity is one of many sacred paths, and individual experience is the ultimate authority in religion. Universalists were less influenced by Transcendentalism at the time but later came to embrace these ideas.

Emerson went on to become one of the most influential figures of the nineteenth century. He was intensely spiritual, a mystic who experienced God everywhere, a philosopher and writer who influenced every future generation of Americans. Although never renouncing his Unitarian ministry, he did not favor institutional religion.

A second great Transcendentalist, Theodore Parker, led a generation of young Unitarians on a triple path of deep spirituality, radical theology, and commitment to social justice in the abolitionist movement. A long term parish minister at Spring Street Unitarian Church in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, Parker believed in the importance of the church as an institution. But he was unflinching in his re-examination of Christianity as a modern religion. Ahead of his time, Parker joined Emerson as a controversial figure in Unitarianism with his famous 1841 speech "The Permanent and Transient in Christianity." His two most offensive points were these:

"Christianity is not a system of doctrines, but rather a method of attaining oneness with God.... Theological doctrines are fleeting as the leaves on trees."

"The authority of Jesus...must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority."

These were fighting words at the time. Doctrines are placeholders, not final truths, Parker maintained. And like any teacher, Jesus should be believed if his teachings make sense, not because Christian tradition grants him divine authority. A group of Parker's influential colleagues asked him to resign.

But Parker refused to leave his ministry and later inspired the "free religion" movement in Unitarianism in the later 19th century. He became a passionate abolitionist whose 1853 sermon on "Justice and the Conscience" inspired Martin Luther King a century later. These were Parker's words: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways.... [But] from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

Of all the Unitarian Transcendentalists, Margaret Fuller may be the most under-appreciated and fascinating figure for us today. She went even farther than Parker in emphasizing work for social justice as central to the religious life. During her brief, unconventional, and tumultuous life, Fuller showed how women could claim their voice in the world of intellectual pursuit and religious innovation. She was a model for how one person can combine deep spirituality, powerful intellect, and courageous work for social change. Rediscovered by feminists in our day, Fuller's legacy was already clear to pioneering feminists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who wrote that Margaret Fuller "possessed more influence on the thought of American women than any woman previous to her time."

Emerson, Parker, Fuller and the other Transcendentalists changed Unitarianism forever and introduced into American culture the revolutionary idea that the individual is the ultimate authority in matters religious. Not the rational, isolated individual, but each of us bound together within a universal energy and love that reveals itself to us everyday. As Emerson put it, we can each enjoy "an original relation to the universe." This universe is one, it is good, and we are its children. So we are open to all sources of revelation and we push back with courage against the forces that block spiritual growth and human flourishing in our time.

BRIEF PAUSE FOR REFLECTION (about 30 seconds)

REFLECTING TOGETHER

Leader: The language of the Transcendentalists can be a bit flowery for us today, and their celebration of the individual is often balanced today with a concern about authentic community. But perhaps more than the other great figures in early Unitarian Universalist history, the Transcendentalists speak to our hearts and minds today. Here are three questions for reflection. Please choose one of them to reflect on and share with the whole group. Let's share the reading of these questions, as we continue around the group.

- 1) Margaret Fuller wrote about transforming spiritual revelations coming at dark times in her life. Have you ever experienced a spiritual breakthrough during a difficult period in your own life? A discovery of something important that emerged from a period of confusion or struggle? What was this personal revelation and how do you think of it as spiritual? It could have been sudden and dramatic, or something more gradual and not especially dramatic. Just something that was a spiritual breakthrough for you.
- 2) Connecting to a universal energy and love is a goal of many people who engage in meditation and other spiritual practices. Others of us experience this sense of transcendence

through connections with other people or with nature. Are there ways in which you sometimes connect to a spirit of life that is beyond your everyday experience?

- 3) In our church life and religious practices, the Unitarian Universalist movement today is working out the tension from our Transcendentalist heritage between the individual and the community, the I and the We. Some say that we have moved too far toward the individual and become encumbered in what we can say as a group and how we can act in our congregations and in the larger world, lest any members object. Others worry that too much emphasis on the community will strip Unitarian Universalism of its central emphasis on individual religious freedom. How do you weigh the balance between the individual and the community? Is our greater risk too much individualism or too much pressure for conformity? You can think of the question for either your own congregation or the UU movement.

Leader: Let's take a moment for reflection on the question each of us would like to respond to. Afterwards we can share with the whole group. It's okay to pass as well.

[Silent reflection for about one minute]

[Sharing With the Group—about 10-15 minutes]

Leader: Who would like to begin the sharing?

[Afterwards] **Leader:** Let us remember as we read together:

Our ancestors, rejecting the notion that Christianity was the one true religion, affirmed the value of all religious traditions.

So we are called to engage with and learn from other religious perspectives.

Leader: Religious humanism is the final chapter in our story of Unitarian Universalism.

RELIGIOUS HUMANISM

[Next reader] The world changed a lot after the Transcendentalists passed from the scene. During the last third of the 19th century, the discovery of evolution raised questions about all traditional religious ideas and the supernatural. If we were products of biological evolution, not direct creations from God, where did that leave the religious stories of human origins and human destiny? If we could understand nature with science, what did that do to the idea of divine intervention in the world?

Even bigger changes came from new technologies. Many historians say that everyday life in the industrialized nations changed more rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century than in any period before or since.

Modern religious humanism was an effort to face this new world without flinching. It was launched as a movement in 1917 when radical ministers John Dietrich and Curtis Reese met at the Western Unitarian Conference in Des Moines, Iowa. This new religious humanism emphasized human values, social reform, and the scientific search for knowledge. It celebrated our human capacity for transformation and our craving for meaning in a materialistic and fragmented world. To reconstruct religion for the twentieth century, humanists let go of the idea of God, the special reverence for the Bible, and the language of the supernatural. This was a revolutionary break with the past.

Many Unitarians, especially on the East Coast, were outraged. (The liberals of the time were in the Midwest.) The humanists were going too far. After hearing about religious humanism at a Harvard conference, one Unitarian minister proclaimed, “I would suffer my right arm be severed from my body before I would take God from my people!”

John Dietrich, the most important figure in Unitarian religious humanism, was originally a Reformed Church clergyman who came to see religion as a human creation, not a revelation from a God outside the universe. He left his ministry before he was expelled for heresy. Dietrich found his way to Unitarianism and eventually to Minneapolis where he became the minister of the First Unitarian Society from 1916 to 1936. He often preached to 2,000 people on Sundays and to many more on radio with a message that was intellectual, forceful, and inspiring.

Although he never declared himself an atheist, Dietrich was clear that the idea of God was not needed. Traditional religion now stood in the way of human progress. But religion was still needed as a way to search together for understanding and human betterment.

About Christianity Dietrich believed that “it entered as a place in the evolution of the world religion, and having fulfilled its mission it must yield before the promise of something better.”

The high water mark of religious humanism came on May 1, 1933 when Dietrich, Curtis, John Dewey and 31 other religious humanists released *The Humanist Manifesto*. It was both a sobering document—this world is all we have—and a liberating one: this world is our home and we have the capacity to understand it and flourish in it. We may be alone in the universe, but we are bound together in a grand quest for knowledge, freedom, and human dignity.

“The time has come,” say the opening words of The Humanist Manifesto, “for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes.... There is great danger of a final, and we believe fatal, identification of the word *religion* with doctrines and methods which have lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problems of human living in the Twentieth Century.”

These were strong words, and some traditional Unitarians wanted the humanists expelled from the denomination. In 1936 Unitarianism survived another crisis that threatened to tear it apart when Frederick May Elliot, minister of Unity Church of St. Paul, Minnesota and an ally of the religious humanists, was elected president of the American Unitarian Association. The traditionalists had hoped for a different result of the election, but they kept faith with the Unitarian tradition of tolerance and withdrew their efforts to expel the humanists. Humanism took its place alongside Transcendentalism as one of the two great strands of religious insight that shape contemporary Unitarian Universalism

Nowadays, a controversy about humanism stems from the belief of some Unitarian Universalists that religious humanists embrace rationality without spiritual intuition. This was hardly ever the case. Here are words from the noted humanist Sophia Fahs, the greatest figure in liberal religious education in the twentieth century. In her 1952 book, *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage*, she wrote about how religious leaders and psychotherapists could work together and learn from one another. Here is how she ended this discussion:

“We might find a unitary and rich meaning for all life within the cosmos, as well as a unitary picture of the single person.... We want a whole self, in a world that is undivided and in a cosmos that is unitary. This means enlarging our imaginative picture of the Everlasting Arms in whose embrace all may feel secure and live in wholeness.”

BRIEF PAUSE FOR REFLECTION [about 30 seconds]

REFLECTING TOGETHER

Leader: One of the boldest tenets of religious humanism is that we have one life to live and it ends with death. (Ironically, it's humanists who take seriously the Christian phrase “from dust thou art and unto dust thou shall return.”) This leaves most Unitarian Universalists (although not all) with the existential question of the meaning of life in the face of a death that is final, with no afterlife. For many other religious people, this would lead to despair, but for many UUs it's an opportunity to reflect on what footprint we hope to leave on the world during our lives—and to challenge ourselves to make a difference during the time we have. Without assuming the particular beliefs of anyone gathered here for this Sources Supper, here are questions for reflection and sharing. You can choose one of them to focus on. Let's continue to read around the circle:

- When you die, what footprint do you hope to leave on the earth and its people? What do you want for your legacy? You can think of this question in large or small terms, for example, referring to all the people on earth or the people close to you, or both. One option is to answer this question in light of how you might have answered it at a previous time in your life or religious journey, and how you answer it now.

- Until religious humanism came on the scene, nearly all Unitarians and Universalists believed in some kind of transcendent dimension that they labeled “God.” Some still do, but many others do not, and thus we have a religion without a consensus about God. It’s no secret that theists (however defined) and humanists (who also differ among themselves) often have difficulty sharing religious space in our congregations and denomination. Here’s a question: given that we are so diverse in religious beliefs and personal religious practices (such as prayer), why are you a Unitarian Universalist? Why be part of this curious religion?

Leader: Let’s take a moment for reflection on the question each of us would like to respond to. Afterwards we can share with the whole group. It’s okay to pass too.

[Silent reflection for about one minute]

[Sharing With the Group—about 10-15 minutes]

Leader: Who would like to begin the sharing?

[Afterwards] **Leader:** Let us remember as we read together:

Our ancestors were fearless in their search for truth, even questioning the fundamental constructs of religion, like the word “God.”

So we are called beyond our own orthodoxies toward an ever-evolving truth.

Leader: This finishes our six stories of Unitarian Universalism. Before we move to the postlude, let’s pause for a moment and reflect on what we have read and shared together in this Sources Supper.

BRIEF PAUSE FOR REFLECTION [about 30 seconds]

POSTLUDE

Leader: Tonight we have told the birth stories of Unitarianism and Universalism, and the stories of several key turning points in Unitarian Universalist history.

[Next reader] There are many other stories to be told, such as how Unitarian and Universalist leaders provided national leadership for social justice in areas such as women's rights -- Olympia Brown was the first ordained woman minister in the country -- the abolition of slavery, the development of universal public education, and the civil rights movements of the late twentieth century.

There is a shadow side to our history as well. Some prominent Unitarians were slow to oppose slavery because their New England businesses would suffer. We did not accept women in real leadership roles until after second wave feminism made it happen in the late 20th century. The black civil rights movement brought out our idealism but also a painful look at how "white" our denomination has been in membership and thinking. Gay and lesbian people had to leverage the language of the civil rights tradition (which UUs already embraced) in order to get a foothold for public acceptance in our denomination in the 1970s. We have participated in the evils of our times even as we have struggled against them.

The Christian phase of the American Unitarian movement ended after World War I, and the Christian phase of the American Universalist movement ended after World War II. Both denominations entered into new waters—with historical roots in Christianity but no longer Christian, still religious but no longer traditionally religious.

Unitarianism and Universalism had been coming closer together since the mid-19th century, and by mid-20th century were separated only by history and tradition. They merged in 1961 to form Unitarian Universalism, a new denomination that carries on the great traditions – and the contradictions – of each.

Leader: The willingness to change is a special strength of our religion. Like all strengths, flexibility comes with a price: it can be hard for us today to feel a deep connection to our heritage, like a tree with beautiful branches but an invisible trunk and root system. We struggle with what we share in common and what is deeply spiritual and transformative about our liberal religious movement. But read with me what we especially want to remember tonight:

Across our differing beliefs and practices, we share a remarkable heritage:

A heritage that has opposed outmoded religious ideas

A heritage that has championed religious freedom

A heritage that has insisted on social reform

A heritage that has respected science and reason

A heritage of pushing back with courage and being transformed by many sources of revelation.

A heritage that has taught us that the universe is one, it is good, and we are its children.

May we be worthy of this heritage, and brave enough to take it to places unimagined by those who came before us.

Leader: We close with a song that is beloved among many of today's Unitarian Universalists: "Spirit of Life."

*Spirit of Life, come unto me
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close, wings set me free
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.*