

UU History & Identity

Lesson 5: What is a Universalist? (part 2)

3.5.2017

Objectives: Explore Universalist thought as it comes to America.

Materials: flipchart, basket of cards, John Murray Lesson box, writing paper.

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ Initial below if you have ever crossed over the Atlantic Ocean.
 - ▶ Some people have done such terrible things that they deserve hell: Agree or disagree?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: Would You Rather...? (5 minutes max)

In the classroom, there will be a selection of cards with questions “Would You Rather...?” Read a few questions aloud and ask the youth to physically move themselves to designated places in the room based on their answers (so standing vote). Give each cluster a few minutes to chatter about their reasons.

Example: “*Would you rather be confined to your room for one year OR go wherever you want but always have to wear a giraffe costume?*”

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “*We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.*”

Teacher reads: (from social reformer and UU, Susan B. Anthony)

“Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world’s estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences.”

4. **Joys and Sorrows** (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of *meeting* one another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation's Embracing Meditation will be made available to your class, so that stones can be put in for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. **What is a Universalist? Part 2.** (30 minutes)

Invite youth into telling the story "Universalism Comes to America." This story will be told with the help of visual props. Give each youth a copy of the script. Each text box is part of the storytelling. Take turns going round the room, as youths speak the storyline and others help move the appropriate props.

(See attached story and props. Follow script.)

6. **Discussion Questions** (15 minutes)

- Why was Murray's message of universal love so unpopular in Calvinist England? What did the Calvinists have to lose?
- What do people get out of believing that God only loves them and not those "other people"?
- Alternatively, what do people get out of believing that God loves all human beings, without exception?
- Look back to Graffiti Wall question. Do you think that some people don't deserve God's love—Adolf Hitler, Muammar Qaddafi, Mohammed Atta (one of leaders of September 11th terrorist attack)?
- Does being Universalist mean we should let people with ideas like Hitler or Qaddafi join our church?
- Not all Unitarian Universalists today frame their religious beliefs around the idea of "God." How might humanist Universalists express their belief in Universalism?

7. **Making it Personal** (15 minutes)

Teacher introduces: Not only in Murray's time and Calvinist England, believing that God loves everyone meant that people of faith should also strive to love everyone – perhaps not "liking" or even being on "friendly terms" but at least intending their good and well-being. And frankly, that is rarely an easy undertaking. Among all of religious teachings, loving one's enemy remains an elusive ideal.

- Invite youth to take a few minutes to consider anyone whom they find really difficult to love – someone they know personally or someone at large, living or not – and to write their reflections to this question: *Without setting conditions that would make that person more deserving of love, how would you go about striving to love that person just as they are? What would enable that? Is it even possible?*
- After several minutes, invite any willing youth to share thoughts on how we would go about loving our enemies.

8. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying together:

“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”

9. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets

Universalism Comes to America

Materials:

- Blue underlay
- Two green underlay strips
- John Murray piece
- Mr. Potter piece
- Chapel
- Boat
- Felt dream bubble
- 5 felt hearts

Here's the script and directions. Each youth has a turn in either reading or adding props to the story:

FIRST STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Props person unfolds the large, blue underlay. Smooth out the wrinkles, and storyteller says...

Okay, here's the setting for our story. It's an ocean. In this part of our history, Universalism comes to North America. Based on the past weeks' lessons, can anyone guess which ocean this is?

SECOND STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Unfold the two strips of green felt and lay them horizontally on the blue underlay, manipulating these strips, saying . . .

Yep, it's the Atlantic. And those two strips of green earth are the continents of Europe and North America.

THIRD STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Lay one green to the left of the underlay so it's stuck to one edge, like an extension to the underlay. Do the same thing on the right with the other piece of green felt. Point to the two pieces of green fabric, saying...

So these are the shores of the Atlantic. One is our North American shore; the other is the European shore—specifically, the coast of England.

FOURTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Point to the blue in between the two shores, saying...

And this is the Atlantic. This story is titled, “Universalism Crosses the Pond.”

Find the John Murray piece and place him on the right hand shore, saying...

This is the man who will bring Universalism across the Atlantic to North America, where it will grow and thrive.

FIFTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Run your finger between the two shores as if traveling from the shore of Europe to the shore of North America. Read this aloud...

This man’s name was John Murray. John grew up with strict Calvinist parents. Anyone remember what Calvinists believed?

[Let your classmates answer: *predestination, the Elect, hell for everyone but a chosen few, everyone born evil, God picks people to save, being good doesn’t matter, etc...*]

As a young man, of course, he rebelled against his parents’ beliefs. At the age of 18, he became a minister and started preaching. The more he read, learned, and reflected, the more he was sure that Calvinism was mistaken. His understanding of God was that God was a source of infinite love for all people.

SIXTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Place a heart near the John Murray piece, saying...

So, throughout England – at that time a totally Calvinist place – Murray started to ride from town to town, taking preaching gigs in churches all over the place. And when he was in the pulpit, he preached that God loved everyone and that Calvinism had it wrong.

SEVENTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Begin moving the John Murray piece around the green strip on the right, and then make him stop somewhere on the green felt. Then read . . .

“Look people,” he basically said, “A totally wise and loving God wouldn’t invent hell to punish his own creations. That’s messed up! People are sinful, yeah, but they are NOT born totally evil. The love of God can inspire anyone to want to be kind and good. Everyone in the UNIVERSE is loved by God. For real – God IS love.”

Put a second felt heart down

EIGHTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Move the John Murray piece to a new spot, and read...

This got the Calvinists pretty worked up. They were angry that Murray wasn't with the predestination program. In several towns, he was banned from ever preaching again. Eventually, he lost his job as minister and was kicked out of the church.

NINTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Place your hand on the John Murray piece, and read...

Not long after his excommunication, his wife and his infant son both died. He nearly got thrown in debtors' prison for all the money he owed in trying to get medical care for them. Life looked pretty bleak. John finally decided that he was through. No more preaching.

Place the boat piece near the right side of the underlay so that it is just touching the green shore felt. Then place the John Murray piece beside the boat on the green felt.

TENTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Read this: John knew there was nothing left for him in England – no job, no family – so he booked passage on a boat to America, a boat called *The Hand in Hand*.

Place John in the Boat and begin moving it slowly across the blue underlay from the right-hand green felt toward the left-hand green felt, stopping in the middle of the blue underlay, saying...

It was a long trip. When people on the boat asked why he was going to the New World, John told them, "To lose myself." It was a really long trip.

ELEVENTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Place the Mr. Potter on the left-hand green felt. Read this:

Meanwhile there was a man in America, named Thomas Potter. Potter was a farmer who owned a lot of land. He was an illiterate man, but a spiritual man, probably a Quaker, a man who spent hours and days thinking about God and humanity. All his neighbors went to churches that preached "hellfire and brimstone," warning people that they were doomed by God's anger. Church was a terrible downer. Potter had been hearing rumors of Universalism, a new movement in Europe. He heard that Universalism spoke of love rather than hatred. He liked the sound of that a lot more than he liked Calvinism.

TWELFTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Lay down the Mr. Potter piece as if he is sleeping. Then set the white felt “dream cloud” above Mr. Potter’s head. Read this:

Potter had been having the strangest dreams. He began to think that God was speaking to him in his dreams.

THIRTEENTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Place a third heart inside the dream cloud. Read this part of the story:

Mr. Potter had a dream in which God told him to build a church building on his land, near the ocean, and that God would send a preacher who would come to preach from that pulpit. God also told Mr. Potter that the preacher would preach a message of love and salvation that would change people’s hearts.

FOURTEENTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Return the Potter piece to a standing position. Set the Chapel on the left-hand green felt near Potter. Read this part of the story:

So Potter did as he was told in the dream. He built a church building outside of the town of Good Luck, in what is now New Jersey. And then he waited. His neighbors and friends mocked him about his empty church, a building with no minister and no congregation. But Thomas Potter had a firm, quiet faith. He wholeheartedly believed that someone was coming to preach there, coming to preach about God and love.

FIFTEENTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Continue moving the boat with John Murray in it. Bring the boat to shore a few inches above where the chapel stands. Then read below:

The Hand in Hand finally made it to America, but just as it neared the coast of New Jersey, it struck a sandbar. The wind continued to blow on shore, keeping the ship pinned in the shallows. So the captain of the ship offloaded some of the heaviest cargo into a smaller boat to lighten the ship. He asked John to go ashore with the cargo, and to buy some food to bring back to the boat while they waited for the wind to turn.

SIXTEENTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Take John off of the boat, and read...

John came to shore. And guess where he set foot on North America? Yeah – on Thomas Potter’s land.

Place Potter beside John, and read...

Potter met him at the shore and said, “I’ve been waiting for you.” Of course, John didn’t know about Mr. Potter or his chapel. They talked for a long time. Potter said he was certain that John Murray had come to preach in his church. John, however, hesitated even to admit that he was actually a minister; he had given that up and didn’t want his heart to get broken and beaten again.

Place a fourth heart between Murray and Potter...

SEVENTEENTH STORYTELLER:

Read all of this:

Potter said, “Look, I know you have been brought here by a Power greater than yourself. You are *meant* to preach in this church that I was *meant* to build. Your ship is stuck, right? Well, let’s just say this: if the wind turns and you get your boat out of here by Sunday, fine. I was wrong and it wasn’t meant to be. But if Sunday comes and the wind hasn’t shifted and you’re still here, you’ll take it as a sign. You’ll preach in that pulpit. Agreed?”

Murray agreed, thinking for certain that they’d be gone by then. But Friday came and the ship was still stuck. Saturday, the wind hadn’t turned. Sunday came, and *The Hand in Hand* was there on the sandbar. John Murray waded ashore and walked to Potter’s little waiting chapel.

EIGHTEENTH STORYTELLER and PROPS PERSON:

Place John and Mr. Potter in front of the chapel. Place a fifth heart on the chapel. Then read the end of the story:

That Sunday he climbed into the pulpit and told the gathered people to go out and give people a glimpse of God’s love. He said that religion gives us “not hell but hope!” And the people there wanted to hear this message. They believed him. They asked him to preach from town to town.

John Murray brought the message of Universalism – of God’s love for every human being, without exception – to North America. Our church is his religious descendant. We’re not inclined to believe in these kinds of miracles, but it’s hard not to be a little amazed by the story of John Murray bringing our faith across the pond.