Reading Ed Schempp

In the early 1960s, Ed Schempp and his son Ellery challenged mandatory recitation of the Lord's Prayer and readings from the King James Version of the Bible in a suburban Philadelphia public school. Their case resulted in the 1963 landmark Supreme Court ruling Abington Township School District v. Schempp, which declared public school-sponsored religious activity unconstitutional. Ed Schempp died at the age of ninety-five in 2003. He was a lifelong Unitarian Universalist.

“Unitarian Universalism is cooperation with a universe that created us. It is a celebration of life. It is being in love with goodness and justice. It is a sense of humor about absolutes. Unitarian Universalism is a fierce belief in the way of freedom and reverence for the sacred dignity of each individual. It is faith in people, hope for tomorrow’s child, confidence in a continuity that spans all time. It looks not to a perfect heaven, but toward a good earth. It is respectful of the past, but not limited to it. Unitarian Universalism is trust in growing and conspiracy with change. It is spiritual responsibility for a moral tomorrow.”

Sermon: A Free Faith

Why are so many people confused about our faith? It’s really not that hard. This is not the Ukrainian Church, not the Unity Church, not the Unification Church, not the Universal Life Church. We are Unitarian Universalists, a long name with a lot of syllables, and with an even longer history, but with some fairly simple principles.

Principles like tolerance, free inquiry, equality for the sexes and respect across the color line. Brotherhood and sisterhood. Not littering. Stewardship of the earth. Basically, being a good neighbor and citizen and realizing that we don’t have to all agree about when life begins or what happens when you die or other unknowables in order to get along. Because the human race will never agree about most of those things. So we have to accept that other people have their own opinions, and if we can’t love them all, at least try to be civil.

Of course, it’s hard to keep so many denominations straight. That’s why there are light bulb jokes. Like how many Roman Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? No light bulbs, candles only. How many Episcopalians? One to call the electrician and nine to complain how they liked the old one better. Quakers? Eight to sit around in a circle until they feel the inner glow. How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb? We don’t agree on any one answer, but come together to ponder life’s persistent light bulb questions.

I grew up in this questioning religion, where we studied pond water and tadpoles and dinosaurs and evolution alongside Bible stories in Sunday School, and my wife and I raised our kids in it, too. So I wasn’t disappointed when my daughter came home one day in third grade and announced she didn’t believe in God. I was happy for her and took this as a good sign. Now I’m a bit of a mystic myself, sensing there’s a generativity at work in the universe that includes me and outlasts me, and I’m fine with calling that reality divine. But I certainly don’t believe in any deity that a third-grader would endorse, the old gentleman in the sky. So I was glad my little girl was asking questions, and not just buying into some conventional balderdash about what to believe or how to behave. It showed a glimmer of critical thinking, if not an intellectual coming-of-age.

You see, I’m the kind of Dad who wouldn’t let his son join the Cub Scouts, even though my kid wanted to learn about camping and tying knots, because on registration night in the elementary school gym the scout master explained that no atheists were allowed, and then I later learned that being gay was also against the scout oath of being reverent and morally straight. So I raised a ruckus with the town school board because the Cubs were advertising and meeting on tax-supported premises. And no organization that requires belief in a Supreme Being, like the Scouts, or discriminating, ought to be using public money or receiving government support. And I feel pretty strongly about that.

You see, we Unitarians virtually invented separation of church and state. It was guys like Thomas Jefferson who came up with the Virginia Statutes of Religious Freedom, the precursor to our First Amendment, and he had help from a lot of the other founders who were also early Unitarians. They were trying to avoid the kind of persecution and sectarian strife that had torn Europe to shreds. They were trying to protect the rights of religious minorities, insuring that the United States would be a safe haven for people who might be different or outside the mainstream. So organized religion had to be kept separate from the machinery of government. Instead of relying on subsidies or police power to spread their tenets, churches would have to depend on persuasion and sweet reason to bring others around to their version of the truth. Which is why near the end of his life, Jefferson predicted that within fifty years, the whole country would be Unitarian.

He thought this was the most reasonable religion and he may have been right. But he was a little too optimistic that Unitarianism would flourish just because it made sense.

We remain a small denomination, a couple hundred thousand people more or less. But sometimes all it takes is a small number to make a big difference. Consider this: a few years ago a major poll came out from the Pew Center. They asked 35,000 Americans whether just one religion could lead to eternal life or whether more than one might have the right stuff. And seventy-percent agreed there’s considerable wiggle-room around matters of salvation. Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, they’re all on the glory train. There are many mansions in my father’s house, that’s what Jesus said. So despite the fulminations of the fundamentalists, Americans are becoming less dogmatic, more open-minded. And I have to think that’s at least partly due to the message Unitarians and Universalists have been preaching these past four hundred years.

Here’s the history, which goes back to the early days of the Reformation, a religious shake-up that really began with Guttenberg and the invention of printing. Because at that point the Bible started to be accessible in vernacular languages, German and Italian and Czech instead of just Latin, with copies in the hands of ordinary people rather than just the priests. Literacy was spreading. The Church in Rome lost the media monopoly it had for the previous thousand years. And naturally, when people started to read the book themselves, they arrived at different interpretations.

The Universalists got their name because they believed in universal salvation. As they read the Bible, God was love, unconditional and all-forgiving, and no loving parent would sentence fallible human beings to an eternity of punishment. That just wasn’t fair or right. It turned the Almighty into the warden of some kind of everlasting Guantanamo. And as the Universalists challenged the existence of hell, the Unitarians were also questioning the whole concept of original sin. Because again in the Bible, right in the first chapter, long before that stuff about forbidden fruit, it says we’re all made in the divine image, female and male. So each life reflects this surpassing wonder, with a value that can’t be reduced to dollars or cents. Each person contains some hint of the infinite.

Now as time passed, Universalism and Unitarians each began to outgrow their Protestant roots. Because if you really believe God loves us all, then that’s got to include everyone, not just Christians. And if you really believe we’re all made in the image of limitless creativity, then again, that means everyone, Rastafarians, secular humanists, Druids and the rest.

So eventually the Unitarians flew beyond the Christian orbit, starting about a hundred and fifty years ago. A woman named Elizabeth Peabody back then was the editor of a little magazine called The Dial that began publishing some of the first translations of the Upanishads and other scriptures from the East, while Ralph Waldo Emerson, another of these Transcendentalists (as they were called), started using terminology like Brahma (the Hindu name for the Creator) to express his idea of an oversoul or cosmic consciousness.

Emerson was born the son and grandson of Unitarian ministers. In fact, it was his grandfather William who was the parson in Concord at the time of the American Revolution, who summoned the Minutemen that April morning when he learned the British troops were advancing to seize the local armory. Paul Revere, who made that midnight ride, was a Unitarian, too. They were mainly fighting for political independence in those days, but by Ralph Waldo’s time the struggle was to free the spirit, also.

Emerson had gone to Harvard, which originally started out as a seminary to train clergy for the churches of New England, and he’d been ordained. But as he matured he reached a point where the old rituals like communion with its bread and wine and symbolism of bloody sacrifice no longer appealed. So he resigned from the ministry and instead of preaching began to lecture on self-reliance, advising his listeners to do their own thinking and look to their own wisdom.

The spiritual path, he might have said, is more like a walk in the in the wilderness than like the half-mile nature loop with the handrails and markers that always leads you back to the ranger’s station. You really don’t know where you’re going to end up. But you shouldn’t be afraid to adventure and explore.

But of course, a liberated spirit’s no use if your body’s in chains. So Emerson was also an abolitionist, a financial contributor to John Brown and the so-called Secret Six who were conspiring to arm the blacks and start a slave revolt in the years before the Civil War. This was dangerous stuff, explosive and deadly earnest. But then, taking on the British army with a rag-tag band of farmers had been risky, too, back in his granddad’s day. Unitarian Universalists are used fighting against long odds, often taking unpopular stands, whether the battle is for women’s suffrage or gay marriage or abortion rights or, like Ed Schempp objecting to something as sacrosanct as the Lord’s Prayer and taking it all the way to the Supreme Court. Not that there’s anything wrong with the Lord’s Prayer, you understand. I like the Lord’s Prayer. Forgive us our debts? That’s the kind of intercession you might hear chanted at Occupy Wall Street or a Bernie Sanders rally. Jesus wasn’t just liberal; he was a social leveler, as radical as they come. Even so, I don’t want some King George or higher authority telling me when to pray or what to pray. That should be a personal choice, a deeply personal decision.

Because choice is sacred. Freedom is sacred to us, and along with freedom, responsibility. Responsibility to save this beautiful planet, to curb a culture of unbridled profiteering and greed, to eliminate racial hatred and religious prejudice, build bridges of global cooperation, to spread democracy, stop torture, stop human trafficking and the degradation of women, create a civilization that values education and music and poetry and science more than the arts of war.

No messiah or guru or committee of ecclesiastical experts can do it for us. It’s up to us, which is a fairly scary and exhilarating proposition.

Obviously scary, because most of us are busy people. I hardly have time to get to my exercise class, much less save the world. But exhilarating because it’s happened before. A small group of intelligent, dedicated people really can change the direction of history. And though I sometimes get disillusioned with Unitarian Universalism, because religious liberals can be as dogmatic as any others, and because we really could use some jazzier hymns, I still know of no better or more dependable hope for the long run.

So there you have it, this faith of mine, where I can be realistic but reverent, link contemplation and action, be true to myself yet join in common cause, experience moral community without anyone pretending to infallibility or moral superiority. For me and others who gather here at the Unitarian Congregation of Taos, it’s an inclusive and spacious home, where people needn’t think alike to be accepted and find room to grow. Should you wish to join us, nuestra casa es tu casa. We welcome you and invite you to make this faith your own.