

The Great Awakening

Readings: 'The History Teacher' by Billy Collins

'Boston Ancestors' by Susan Minot

'Personal Address' by Pat Schneider

For a moment, let's imagine that we are not gathered together for worship in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 2016, but gathered together for worship in New Brunswick, in the New Jersey colony in 1723. Some things would be much the same. There would be hymns, music, and a sermon. We would be gathering with people we know and people we don't yet know. But some things would be different. Electric lights. Central heating. Most of us arriving here by car. In 1723, New Brunswick was a frontier town, the far western edge of European settlement in North America. There would be nothing like our settled, established meeting place.

But perhaps the most significant difference would be that in 1723 in New Brunswick, about half of you would have no idea what I am saying right now. You would not understand English. See, in 1723, New Brunswick was a divided town, half of the town's residents were English-speaking Presbyterians from Ireland and Scotland. The other half were of Dutch origin and usually worshiped in a Dutch-language Reformed Church. But that all changed in 1723. The two ministers in town, two of the very few multi-lingual people in town, came to understand that their beliefs were very similar, so similar that they should join their churches together. They believed that their unity of belief would hold the town together as one worshipping community despite differences in language, culture, and national origin. As they worshiped together, the service switched between English and Dutch. The sermon would be in Dutch, followed by an English-language prayer. The hymns alternated languages. People endured portions of the worship service that they could not understand, knowing that it was resonating with other members of their community. The call to communion was always in both languages, so everyone could understand what was happening at the moment of their worship service that was considered most important.

This merging of the churches of New Brunswick was one of the earliest events of the Great Awakening, a mass religious revival that swept the American colonies, and much of Western Europe, in the 1730s and 40s. It was marked by revivals, evangelism, the authority of the individual, emotionality, a focus on salvation, and the transgression of denominational, ethnic, racial, and class boundaries. Church historian Thomas Kidd describes it in this way:

'Radical evangelicals ordained untutored, and occasionally nonwhite, men as pastors. They sometimes allowed women and nonwhites to serve as deacons or even as elders. They led crowds of the poor, children, and nonwhites singing through the streets. They permitted Native Americans, African Americans, and women to [speak] in mixed congregations, and they commended their words as worthy of white male attention. They endorsed the visionary ecstatic experiences of the disenfranchised. They believed that individuals could have immediate assurance of salvation by the indwelling witness of the Spirit. They

affirmed laypeople's right to critique their pastors... In the revivals, the world seemed to turn upside down as those with the very least agency in eighteenth-century America felt the power of God surge in their bodies.¹

Doesn't that sound incredible, like a glimpse of paradise? Doesn't that sound awfully close to the Beloved Community, that reign of love and justice, that we yearn for? The beloved community is an idea developed by philosopher Josiah Royce and popularized by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It is a vision of a community where love and justice prevail for all people, where all people value and work for the common good. There is a spirit of kinship that connects individuals to one another across boundaries of race, class, political opinions and all other divisions. A community in which the voices and experiences of all people are valued, where the divisions between the haves and have-nots fade and equality emerges. And, to think, we're only about 300 years too late.

But, like all stories from history, this story is not that simple. We don't get to listen to the version of history presented by the history teacher in the poem we heard earlier. We need to consider the beliefs that brought all these people together. The theology that united New Brunswick and swept through the American colonies would be hard for most of us gathered here today to stomach. The theology of the Great Awakening was based on the fear of a vengeful condemning God and the threat of hell. Members of the movement believed in a fire-and-brimstone hell and that most people are destined for eternal suffering when they die. Fear of hell is what brought people together. They wanted to know they were saved. Visions, ecstasies, mystical experiences, and dreams are what would give them that assurance.

Many of the preachers of this era, including those at the church in New Brunswick, thought they could tell who was saved and who wasn't. They would stop people that they thought were 'unconverted'—not yet saved—from receiving communion. They would stand in front of them if they stood up during the service to receive communion and block their way forward. These preachers were God's self-appointed defensive linemen. They were the 18th century church equivalent of, depending on who you'll be cheering for this evening, the Carolina Panthers' Charles Johnson, Star Lotulelei, Kawann Short, and Jared Allen or the Denver Broncos' Derek Wolfe, Sylvester Williams, and Malik Johnson. These preachers, like the football players, attempt to stop all who try to move past them.

As some people were not permitted to fully participate in the community, others were welcomed in. They were brought together by their fear of hell and their yearning for an experience that would prove to them that they were among the saved.

And this yearning for assurance of salvation brought people together to a degree that is hard to fathom. In the 1730s and '40s, itinerant preachers would go from town to town in the American colonies and people flocked to hear them. The estimates of crowd size are incredible. In a time when the entire population of Boston was 14,000 people, 8,000 people gathered in an open field to hear preacher George

1 Kidd, Thomas S. *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009. Page xv.

Whitefield. And this was before modern amplification technology. I have no idea how that worked. One of my church history professors in seminary came up with an analogy that gets close to explaining the cultural phenomenon and crowd sizes of the Great Awakening. He said it was as if everyone in this country who watches the Super Bowl all did so together, in person. It's hard to imagine.

It is hard to imagine that almost 300 years ago the mass cultural experience that everyone made an effort to participate in were religious revivals. People would stop all they were doing to hear a great sermon, to participate in an altar call, to seek assurance of their salvation. Our culture is not like that anymore. Now, our mass cultural experiences, what is left of them in an increasingly fragmented society, are entertainment and sometimes politics, never religion. Almost 300 years ago, people gathered to hear the story of the man they believe to be divine, whose body was broken for them, as an act of atonement. They recreated and remembered that sacrifice in the ritual of communion.

And now, those of us who gather to watch the Super Bowl tonight will watch very mortal men's bodies broken for us. Know this, I love football. Growing up, my family always threw a big Super Bowl party. It was one of my favorite days of the year. I've watched the Super Bowl nearly every year – even when I lived in Eastern Europe and the game started at 1am local time, I got together with other American expats and pulled an all-nighter. The past few years, my team, the Seattle Seahawks, have played in the Super Bowl and it has brought such joy to my life. And there are few things as comforting to me as a Sunday afternoon rest with a football game on TV.

And, as it becomes increasingly clear that football leaves real and lasting impact on players' bodies and minds, it is feeling less and less ethical to be a witness to the breaking of those bodies and minds. The repetitive brain trauma of football—and other collision sports—leave many players with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a disease that symptoms include dementia, aggression, memory loss, and depression. Some researchers believe that up to 80% of professional football players eventually suffer from this disease. Now, I'm not telling you to cancel your Super Bowl party tonight – I know if my Seahawks were playing I'd watch every minute—but is their sacrifice worth it? Is it possible to watch football ethically, knowing what we know about its long-term impacts? I'm not sure. And if we as individuals stop watching, is that enough? Is that more about our need for purity than creating real and lasting change that would save these men's brains and bodies? And can we accept that adults, now knowing what we know, make the choice to continue to play football, trading passion for the sport and money for lasting brain damage. There are so many choices we allow one another make that are unhealthy. This might just be one more.

Back to the Great Awakening. It shaped our country deeply. The authority of the individual preached during this time influenced the philosophy on which our democracy is based. Methodists and Baptist churches—the two biggest branches of Protestantism in this country—grew dramatically from the revivals. The idea of church-shopping, checking out a few congregations before deciding which one you would attend, started in The Great Awakening. Before then, people would attend the church closest to them, usually because it was the only church available, or at least the only church nearby where their

language was spoken. The revivals of the Great Awakening left new congregations in their wake, giving residents a choice of where to worship for one of the first times in history. Those of us who passed another congregation on our way here this morning owe a debt to the revivalists of the Great Awakening.

There were people who opposed the Great Awakening – and we as Unitarian Universalists should pay special attention to them. Though there weren't people in the New World who identified as Unitarians at this point in history—that would happen a generation or two later—there were people beginning to write and preach and teach Unitarian ideas. And since they influenced the people who later claimed the name Unitarian, they are our spiritual ancestors. Centered in Boston, they are our collective Boston Ancestors. It is somewhere out of them, alive or dead, that we have sprung.

While these early Unitarians opposed the theology of the Great Awakening, they focused most of their opposition on the style of the revivals and the people involved in them. They didn't think uneducated people, women, and people of color should preach. The Unitarians were rigid in this point; the Universalists, as we heard earlier, were open to preachers with more diverse identities. When I first discovered this aspect of our denominational history, I wished for a history that the history teacher from Billy Collins' poem would have told. I wanted our ancestors to be heroes and history to make me feel good. But history is not like that. It is always more complicated. The people who would become Unitarians were heavily invested in the status quo. They were elite and elitist. Their ministers were graduates of Harvard or Yale. If you didn't have a degree, you didn't belong in a pulpit, they would argue. They also hated the emotionality of the Great Awakening. For them, religion was an intellectual pursuit, involving the study of the scriptures in their original Greek and Hebrew, reading the work of theologians, and making rational cases for belief. While we now affirm the priesthood and prophethood of all believers, the idea that each of us knows religious truth and has the authority to speak and act on our understanding of the truth, the proto-Unitarians of the 1740s weren't so sure about that. They did not approve of people preaching sermons about their experiences and visions of heaven and hell. For them, sermons should have footnotes, be rooted in the authority of a community of scholars, not individual experience. They did not think sermons should bring everyone in the church to emotional ecstasy. All of these things threatened the established churches and the way they thought things should be done.

It was not until I was in a Unitarian Universalist history class in seminary that I learned about times when Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists behaved in ways that I am not proud of. The UU history I was taught as a child in religious education classes at a congregation was an unbroken line of saints and heroes. The kind of feel-good history taught by the history teacher from the poem. I was proud to have a kinship with the famous Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists listed on a hot pink T-shirt I proudly wore in elementary school. And perhaps that is the right history to teach our children, a history that fills them with esteem for their polysyllabic religious tradition that no one else in school has ever heard of.

That is not the whole story, however. We cannot live with only happy history. We need to know the real, complicated story of our denominational history, a story of people who fall short of their ideals, who make mistakes, who try their best and sometimes fail spectacularly. There are a lot of moments in our religious

histories that do not instill esteem, but much more complicated emotions. In addition to being anti-slavery activists, American Unitarians were also among the leading advocates for the slave system. It was Unitarian president Millard Fillmore who signed the Fugitive Slave Act into law. The American Unitarian Association volunteered to “civilize” the Northern Ute Tribe of Colorado and Utah on behalf of the federal government, an effort that ended in massacre and removal from ancestral land. Universalists supported industry titans over striking workers. The first people of color to enter our ministry struggled against institutional obstacles ranging from indifference to hostility. These are hard histories – and I hope to explore them with you in the coming years.

Some people struggle with these histories. I was among them. With time, this knowledge leaves me more deeply connected to our shared faith. I like stories that are complicated, because the story of my life and the stories of our lives are complicated. And when our stories about our religious tradition are complicated, it is easier to find a place in this community. We know that our complications will blend together with everyone else's in Unitarian Universalism, past and present. It is easier to create the next chapter in our shared history if we remember that the previous chapters are not full of saints, but of faithful and fallible people like us.

To close, I want to leave you with a vision for a future chapter in our shared story. We dream and yearn for and work for the beloved community, the reign of love and justice. This is another time and place to imagine ourselves, but since it hasn't happened yet, we can't know the details. The Beloved Community, like the revivals during the Great Awakening unites people across race, gender, ethnicity and class. But our vision is not of the 18th century. Perhaps, we dream of a great banquet, the welcome table filled by all kinds of people. People who know salvation and spiritual truths, but maybe not the same spiritual truths. People whose actions are guided not by a fear of hell, but the desire to love the hell out of the world. People who are saved by love, by forgiveness, by hope, by the truth as they understand it, by the indwelling witness of the spirit, by a single peach. People who know these truths in their hearts and minds and bodies. At this table, at this banquet, there are no Super Bowl defensive linemen blocking those who believe differently than they do, judging who is worthy and who is not. At this table, we are all complicated. We are all welcome. We all are beloved.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.