

Onward and Upward Forever?

Readings 'Boston Ancestors' by Susan Minot
 'Progress' by Julie Cadwallader-Staub
 from 'In the 21st Century, We Are All Migrants' by Mohsin Hamid

In 1833, James Freeman Clarke, one of the most important Unitarian ministers and theologians of the 19th century suffered a crisis. He was freshly graduated from Harvard Divinity School, newly ordained and ready to serve. He asked for an appointment 'out west' and was sent to Louisville, Kentucky, which was the west then. The manners and theology of the polite New England society in which he was raised did not work in this river city. The theology, the preaching, the ways of being he learned at Harvard did not work in Louisville. The people were rowdy and drank and many of them couldn't read. Clarke was bewildered by this. Many of his congregants owned other humans as slaves – and he was much more accustomed to New England communities that benefited indirectly from the enslavement of others. How he had been trained to be was irrelevant to his new city. So he started searching for what would work in his new city and we as Unitarian Universalists are still beneficiaries of that search nearly 200 years later. He started looking to the other Christian churches in town to see what they were preaching, and borrowed some of their messages, but did not stop his search there. He started looking beyond Christianity, becoming one of the first Americans to engage in serious study of Eastern Religions, along with his friends Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Throughout his life, James Freeman Clarke helped to shift Unitarianism into the faith that we recognize. In a church he started later in his life, he introduced the innovation of governance by committees – not only a leadership board to make decisions, but teams of people to take responsibility for and carry out the work of the church – a youth committee to manage the Sunday school, a benevolent action committee that directed the charity work of the church, a music committee selected the hymns. This was a radical idea then, an idea shunned by other Unitarian churches. And, all you need to do is look at our church calendar, to know that the idea of committees organized to do the work of the church won. I find it hard to imagine how our church would function without our capable committees and shared ministries.

There are legacies of Clarke's innovations that don't serve us as well – one of them is theological. Shortly before his death, Clarke published what he called 'The Five Points of the New Theology.' This was a bold theological proclamation in direct opposition to the five points of Calvinism. To know why his work matters, we need to know what he was opposing. So here is a brief summary of the five points of Calvinism. When I learned this in church history class, the professor offered us the acronym 'TULIP,' like the flower. Given that the Dutch Reformed Church is among those traditions that have its roots in Calvinism, this acronym feels especially appropriate.

T is for Total Depravity – the idea that people are inherently evil because of original sin

U is for Unconditional Election – the idea that God chooses who is saved for God's own reasons that are unknowable to us. There is nothing one can do to earn God's favor or salvation, eternal life in heaven after death.

L is for Limited Atonement – the idea that the atonement, the forgiveness of sins that happened with the death of Jesus, only applies to the elect, the people that God picked. The death of Jesus didn't save everyone.

I is for Irresistible Grace – the idea that if you are among the lucky few that God wants to save, you cannot resist it. You have no free will with regards to salvation.

P is for Perseverance of the Saints – the idea that once you are saved, there is nothing you can do to lose salvation.

I find the mechanics of God and grace and salvation in this theology confusing and struggle to see how people created this based on the stories and teachings of Jesus in the Bible. And that is part of why I am Unitarian Universalist.

So, in contrast to the Five Points of Calvinism, which was a strong theological impulse in his day, James Freeman Clarke authored 'The Five Points of the New Theology.' His points don't have a handy acronym. They are:

the fatherhood of God -- The idea that God is the father of all.

the brotherhood of man -- The idea that we are all one family – if Clarke was writing today, he would surely use language that includes people of all genders and have more inclusive language throughout this list.

the leadership of Jesus - The idea that Jesus is the best spiritual teacher we have – notice that he is not making any theological claims about Jesus' divinity or the meaning of his death.

salvation by character - the idea that our actions, whether we choose goodness, impact our eternal fate.

And, finally, the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.¹ – the idea that things are getting better every day and will keep getting better forever.

These points spread throughout liberal Christianity, Unitarianism, and later Unitarian Universalism. I know many folks who were raised in our tradition who were taught to memorize the five points in their religious education classes.

As you can probably see from the title of this sermon, I am struggling with that final point. 'The progress of mankind onward and upward forever' is a faith statement that I'm not sure I can sign onto, that I'm not sure serves us well as we try to live in this world. I have no intention of throwing out the rest of Clarke's ministry or theological statements. I like the other four points. And, if the Five Points of Calvinism or Clarke's Five Points of The New Theology were our only choices, I would quickly choose the new theology, but we know that belief doesn't work like that. We have many options.

Clarke was not alone in his faith in the future. His colleagues and contemporaries shared it. Theodore Parker was one of the most prominent ministers of the era, whose radical abolitionist politics led him to be shunned by other Unitarian clergy, with Clarke as a notable exception. Parker preached in 1853:

'I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.'²

About a century later, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. paraphrased that idea when he preached, 'The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice,' a phrase I—and so many others—have subsequently quoted and paraphrased.

So we come by our belief in progress for good reasons, solid theological reasons. Given the dominant theologies of the mid-19th century, our Boston ancestors chose well. I believe it is better for us, as a

¹ My source on James Freeman Clarke is McGonigle, Gregory. 'James Freeman Clarke.' *The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*. September 23, 2002. Retrieved from <http://uudb.org/articles/jamesfreemanclarke.html>

² 'Theodore Parker and The 'Moral Universe.' *National Public Radio*. September 2, 2010. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129609461>

religious community, to place our faith in the future rather than the past. About a generation after Clarke wrote his *New Theology*, a new religious movement that placed its faith in the past emerged – Christian fundamentalism. Exploring that movement is beyond the scope of what I can do today, but I wanted to mention it because I think it's important for people who are part of our liberal religious tradition to know that Christian fundamentalism arose largely in reaction to preachers and theologians like Parker and Clarke, our Boston Ancestors and other liberal Christians. Christian fundamentalism is about a century old; it is a relatively new idea.

And, of course, our beliefs shape our politics. I suspect much of our current politics is a fight about whether to be forward-looking or backward looking as a country. Calls to 'Make America Great Again' say that there was a time when America was great and it is our work to return to that past, a past that is more myth than history. Others echo black poet Langston Hughes who writes in his beautiful poem 'Let America Be America Again:'

'O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free...

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!³

Is our country a lost paradise or an unfulfilled promise? When we dream about what this country can be, do we look backwards or forward? To we return to something from before or create something new? That conflict is at the heart of politics today. It is a conflict between two myths, the myth of a perfect past and the myth of a perfect future, which is what an unshakeable faith in progress is.

Paul Kingsnorth is an ecologist who describes himself as a post-ecologist, someone exploring how to live as our notions of ecological preservation fail. He writes, 'The myth of progress is to us what the myth of god-given warrior prowess was to the Romans, or the myth of eternal salvation was to the conquistadors: without it, our efforts cannot be sustained. Onto the root stock of Western Christianity, the Enlightenment at its most optimistic grafted a vision of an Earthly paradise, toward which human effort guided by calculated reason could take us. Following this guidance, each generation will live a better life than the life of those that went before it. History becomes an escalator, and the only way is up. On the top floor is human perfection.'⁴

We come from a tradition that has tremendous faith in the future, in the idea that the best is yet to come. It might be, but to whatever faith we have in the future, in this era of impending climate disaster and rising authoritarianism around the world needs to be a less certain faith, a faith that holds both hope and hopelessness, a faith that does not expect an escalator rising ever upward, but steps forward and back, and sideways with speeds constantly accelerating and decelerating. To claim anything else is a lie. Paul Kingsnorth the post-ecologist writes 'The elite of ancient Rome or the Indus Valley Civilization or Ur of the Chaldeans doubtless believed that the arc of justice was bending towards their own worldview, too, but

³ 'Let America Be America Again.' in Hughes, Langston. *The Collective Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Page 189.

⁴ Quoted in Ladd, Nancy McDonald. *After the Good News*. Boston, Skinner House Books: 2019. Page 44

it didn't, in the end.'⁵ This idea haunts me. What will people make of our worldview in a few centuries? A worldview usually works until it suddenly doesn't. And, given all that is happening in our world, it might be time for our worldview to shift.

Last Sunday, I mentioned that Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd's book *After the Good News* has been a source for me as I work toward a more honest view of human nature. It has also been a great source for me as I wrestle with the faith in progress that is so deeply embedded in Unitarian Universalism.

There are clearly ways that progress is happening, ways that we are moving onward and upward, but to craft these stories we leave much out. Ladd writes, in one of her book's most powerful passages: 'When viewed purely through the lens of abstract and universalizing measurements, [a] utopian vision was altogether founded, perhaps even earthshakingly successful. Steven Pinker, a contemporary public intellectual, has used data analysis to show that people live longer, eat better, take more vacations, and enjoy much better dental health than denizens of a pre-enlightenment age. With these indisputable measurements, he argues that the twentieth century project of benevolent uplift has basically worked. There are a great many generalized data sets to prove it. From ten thousand feet above the ground, the facts don't lie. It only gets tricky when we move down from the vantage point of general trends and toward the specific circumstances of people's lives...

Pinker has gone so far as to declare that the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment is an isolated case, rationalizing that the fatal racism that produced that experiment is subsumed by the larger optimistic trends his data show. In that infamous 1930s public health project, impoverished African-American men were studied throughout the untreated progression of the disease without any informed consent.

Pinker seems to understand that act as collateral damage on the way toward improved health outcomes for the broadest spectrum of the American public...

In this way, Pinker seems to imply that some people just have to take the hit, since the cost of each individual injustice pales in comparison to the larger project. What neither he nor most of the progressive luminaries of... religious modernism are willing to admit when they proclaim inevitable progress is that the same people always seem to take that hit. And the same people always seem to garner the greatest rewards.

[This] failure comes in... persistent refusal to acknowledge that we can and must do better. Human lives don't pale in comparison to the grand abstraction of enlightenment progress. When we say that immigrants, children, women, and people of color cannot be collateral damage in the swinging arc of history, it is not a detail or a nit that needs picking. It is the necessary corrective that keeps enlightenment optimism from running away with itself down the well-trodden path of exploitation and privilege.'

Ladd concludes, 'One cannot deny the benefits of enlightenment rationalism nor the quality-of-life improvements brought by a scientific age. The progressive church of the modern era has been utterly transformed by those enlightenment ideals – but the church is also called to higher things. As such, we don't have the luxury of lazily denying that even our most successful progressive reforms have systematically excluded – and sometimes even preyed upon—the people who do not already stand at the center of power.

⁵ Quoted in Ladd, page 44

And there you have it. An oft-unacknowledged arc of history that doesn't seem quite so triumphant.⁶

It is a trope in preaching in the liberal church that you have to give the people hope... and I'm realizing that sometimes I've done that at the cost of being true. What does it look like to be truthful and hopeful at once, to recognize that things are not always getting better and what does get better often comes at tremendous cost? I don't have the answers yet, but these are the questions that this time asks of me. I suspect some of you are wrestling with them as well.

To close, I want to return to the other four points of James Freeman Clarke's New Theology, because, with some adjustments to account for the way our religious tradition has evolved over the past 150 years, the points are guides that can help us now:

the fatherhood of God – we are beloved. There is a love holding us, just because we are.

the brotherhood of man – We are one family. We are all facing what is ahead of us together. We can't leave anyone behind for the sake of progress. No exceptions.

the leadership of Jesus – We need to find our ethical teachers. Perhaps for you those teachers include Jesus of Nazareth, perhaps not. Regardless, we need to think about what it means to be faithful, ethical, and just and we need to have examples in this work. We need to engage in spiritual practices and strengthen our spirits so we can act with intention and care.

salvation by character – Our actions, what we collectively choose to do, how we collectively choose to be together, determines our fate as individuals, the fate of our local communities, the fate of our country, and the fate of our planet.

I am not sure if the arc of the moral universe inevitably bends in one way or another. But I do know that we have the power to shape our fate, to help bend that moral arc. Let us act wisely, ethically, and courageously. May we keep on until we find the hope, joy, and peace we seek. And may love guide us.

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

⁶ Ladd, pages 33-35