

Are We the Elite?
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It is a contradiction in terms to *prepare* to be *surprised*. Nonetheless, I urge you to prepare to be surprised by some of the ways that our religious ancestors saw their world and shaped their world. The subtitle to this morning's topic is "Progress and Its Shadow." In Unitarian Universalist history, class and elitism are linked to concepts of progress. Progress has been kicked into the gutter and deservedly so. After much wrestling, however, I went to the gutter, retrieved progress, washed it off, hammered out the dents and hammered it into a more appropriate shape, and I offer it as a gift. After I share an extended excerpt from the new book *Elite* by Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Harris, I will describe that refurbished gift of progress.

"The myth among us is that Unitarianism has always been liberal – not only theologically, but in literature, politics, and social action as well," according to Mark Harris.¹ He writes, "Unitarian Universalists today – who uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every person s their first Principle – would be shocked to read the title of a book published in 1902 by the American Unitarian Association: *The Blood of the Nation: A Study of the Decay of Races Through the Survival of the Unfit*.² The author was David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford and the most renowned ichthyologist in America."

"During the early twentieth century, Jordan became the most sought-after speaker at Unitarian events. Between 1902 and 1916, he published nineteen books with the denominational imprint, Beacon Press. He was its most prolific author with most of his titles remaining on the Beacon backlist until the eve of World War II." [I continued reading an excerpt from the "Scientific Salvation" chapter of *Elite*, concluding the excerpt with the following paragraphs.]

¹ *Elite: Uncovering Clasm in Unitarian Universalist History*, Mark W. Harris, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2011, p. 34.

² Page 78.

“Jordan never adopted the extreme position of advocating the intentional development of a super race . . . [though] he claims that if the human race could control mating, then society could standardize strength, beauty, endurance, or virtue. Yet he contends that the best men would never submit to this kind of control. The best would want to choose their mates, and this was also better for society. If scientists chose mates for people based on the best bloodlines, they would exclude the two most important factors in mating, love and initiative. Descendants of such mates would not know the meaning of love.”

“Still, Jordan’s moderate position of positive eugenics in his writings implied that the stronger, more heroic races would produce better babies, while the weaker and less intelligent people who were surviving the wars would slowly destroy the human race with their inferior stock. It is a short step to the belief that inferior people should not reproduce (“negative” eugenics) and perhaps should not be allowed to live at all if the human race is to progress.” [This concludes the excerpt from *Elite*.]

Not only were some Unitarians eugenics boosters, they were elitists in other ways, as well. In Massachusetts in the 18th and 19th centuries, our religious ancestors belonged to the Standing Order of Congregational churches. Some of these Congregational churches had ministers with Unitarian tendencies. Tax dollars supported these parish churches. The “disestablishment” of the Standing Order finally took place in 1833.

Baptists, Quakers, and Universalists had reason to cheer – no longer would they have to pay taxes to support someone else’s church. Mark Harris observes, “What is perhaps most astounding about all this is that the liberal wing of the Congregational Church in Massachusetts – which said that faith should be ethical, non-dogmatic, and give each person the right of private judgment about their beliefs – made no effort to disestablish the state church,” notes Mark Harris.³

For many decades in 19th century New England, Unitarians were part of the social and cultural elite. To be a member of the Unitarian clergy meant to be educated, typically at Harvard.

³ Page 26.

Unitarians were often at home in the upper middle class or the upper class. By the way, our current Unitarian Universalist Association president, the Rev. Peter Morales, is the first president of the UUA who did not attend Harvard. He is the first UUA president from west of the Mississippi, the first Latino president, and the first president who spoke Spanish in his home growing up.

In contrast, Universalists were more often farmers or other members of the middle class. “New England Unitarians inherited their churches from generations past. With very few exceptions Universalists created their own societies and built their own meetinghouses.”⁴ To be a member of the Universalist clergy often meant you were a circuit rider, visiting several rural congregations in sequence and you relied more upon emotion than upon reasoning as a primary way to reach people.

Our religious ancestors were not ones to let their emotions carry them away. Too much emotion might lead people astray.

One of the great Unitarian luminaries, William Ellery Channing (who was born in 1780 and died in 1842), said that working class people were better off than lawyers and merchants because they did not aspire as high and therefore would be less liable to disappointment when they failed.⁵ Self-culture was important, and it meant cultivating habits of hard work, frugality, perseverance, and sobriety. “The Unitarians tended to sacrifice social justice to their need for harmony, and the idea of one class agitating for power was dangerous to them.”

My intention is not to ridicule our religious ancestors. That would be too easy. My intention is to evoke them as three dimensional human beings, embedded in their time and place. They were seldom aware of the limitations of their perspective. In fact, they found it as difficult as *we* do. It is difficult to see oneself clearly – difficult, but worthwhile. We can see each other more clearly when we are aware of our own “shadow” – the parts of ourselves of which we are not proud.

⁴ Page 65 but is quoting historian Peter Hughes.

⁵ Page 50

In a like manner, we can see our religious tradition more clearly when we are aware of its “shadow.” Fast forward to the present. Unitarian Universalist congregations struggle in traditional working class towns and prosper in more affluent suburbs. Laile Bartlett writes, “While Unitarians engage in social action opposing class and racial discrimination, and in study of the world’s people and their religions, those living in suburbia are increasingly isolated from the objects of their concern.”⁶ Cities became places where poor people lived, and the auto enabled the middle class to escape⁷

Reflecting on matters of elitism and class, I had several insights. First, progress has a shadow. You may be saying, “well, duh.” Yet I had not seen it quite so clearly before. Helping to bring about progress is a personal motivation of mine. My ministry is about helping to make ourselves better people and helping to make the world a better place. I believe that individuals exist to make groups better, and groups exist to make individuals better. Progress is at the heart of my ministry.

However, I cannot ignore the many examples of exclusionary, discriminatory effects following efforts to make progress. The roots of the problem? It is tough to have a frame of reference expansive enough to tell whether progress comes at the expense of others. It is tough to prioritize. It is tough and to put an institutional foundation under kindness and compassion. Thankfully, progress is not a zero sum game. There are opportunities for win/win/win . . . and *win*.

Progress as a concept and a goal can be rehabilitated by skillfully integrating as many perspectives as possible. Our skill at integrating perspectives increases through active involvement in congregational life and through active involvement in civic life. We develop skill at integrating perspectives through practice and through learning from others who are able to do this. Do those who are highly developed in this area constitute an elite? Yes. However, as philosopher Ken Wilber might say, development is a form of elitism to which *all* are invited.

⁶ Page 110.

⁷ Page 114.

Speaking personally, my own class situation has changed. Thanks to the generosity of my elderly friend Fred, who passed away last year, I have a measure of financial security for the first time in my life. This brings new choices, new concerns, and new questions. How do I live my values now that I have more resources? What will change? What will remain the same? What will I do about the heartache I feel for the many people who are struggling in this harsh economy? How will I respond to people living in developing nations who have so much need?

I do not yet have answers to all of these questions. I trust the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism to guide me, especially the words and deeds of social justice activists, whether or not they are identified as religious people. I will continue shopping in my beloved thrift stores. I will continue living in my mobile home. I will continue buying items on sale at the grocery store.

Among the changes I foresee are searching for ways to more effectively invite others into an elitism to which all are invited. How? I plan to do this through funding educational scholarships for Unitarian Universalist students in the Philippines and elsewhere. I plan to do this through developing relationships in broad-based organizing through the Inland Empire Sponsoring Committee. The IESC is about building power. Being powerful is an elitism to which all are invited.

To conclude, Mark Harris writes, “Many Unitarian Universalists long to have a faith that learns from all kinds of people, rich and poor.”⁸ He continues, “Perhaps UU is a thinking person’s faith, but we can find thinking people in all classes and stripes of society.” Finally, “Can we change? It will not be by denominational fiat or by a bunch of white liberals feeling guilty that their congregation is not diverse. It will require personal connections. It will require sharing power and control. It will require changed perceptions of status and education.”⁹

May personal connections inform us and inspire us. May we share power and control. May our elitism be one to which all are invited. May it be so!

⁸ Page 8

⁹ Page 128.