

**Theology Ablaze**  
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What were the top news stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? A group of scholars and journalists compiled that list.<sup>1</sup> Three of the top 100 news stories occurred in 1961. Can you guess which stories? [pause and repeat guesses]. The top news stories in 1961 were the first man in space (a Russian), the first American in space, and the construction of the wall separating east and west Berlin.

For some strange reason, the formal consolidation of the Unitarians and the Universalists 50 years ago today did not make the top 100 news stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century list. That formal consolidation may not have been one of the top stories in the world at large, but it was one of the top stories in Unitarian Universalist history. The formal consolidation followed decades of cooperation between the two groups in terms of religious education and cooperation by their respective youth organizations.

Some of us were adults in 1961. Some of us were not yet born. Speaking personally, I was five years old on May 15, 1961. My concerns on one fine spring day in 1961 was not what would become of the new UU Association of congregations, but rather how to artistically convey the image of a happy child standing on a swing. Somehow this sample of my early artwork escaped oblivion and was given to me by my mother when I was old enough to appreciate it [show the crayon drawing].

A few things stand out to me. Each of the ropes supporting the swing is tethered to a *different* tree. The sun has a dark ring, as if it were Saturn. The child has a wide smile (though no teeth). The missing teeth are offset by my five-year-old attempt to draw anatomically correct ears. Each little ear has a dot in it, conveying depth and Picasso-like cubist sensibility. ;)

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.inventions.org/culture/stories.html>

While I was making art with crayons in the spring of 1961, dedicated Unitarian and Universalist men were busy consolidating the two traditions. Rev. Donald Szantho Harrington, minister of The Community Church of New York, as he celebrated the consolidation of the two religious traditions in a sermon in which he sketched the histories of the two traditions. He said:

“The Unitarians denied the doctrine of the Trinity and affirmed the unity of God. The Universalists denied the doctrines of predestination and damnation, and affirmed the ultimate salvation of all souls and the unqualified goodness of God . . . Rejecting the concept of infallible revelation in creed, hierarchy or book, they were thrust back into dependence upon reason, individual conscience and the mystical sense. Rejecting salvation by faith in Christ, they were driven to the idea of salvation by character, that is, by responsible, ethical living . . . “

“Thus, they were led gradually to shift their emphases from Unitarian or Universalist Christian theological dogmas, to the affirmation of the liberal way and spirit in religion. This is characterized by freedom of individual conscience in the search for religious truth, toleration of differences of conviction within the fellowship of the church, the exercise of reason in religion, and a primary emphasis upon individual ethical character and a just society as the goals of common religious life.”<sup>2</sup>

Rev. Harrington continued, “History’s answer is clear. We are the children of the Judea-Christian heritage. We affirm with gratitude and joy the universal truths taught by Jesus and embraced by Christianity. We affirm equally the universal truths taught by the great Jewish prophets and embraced by Judaism, plus the universal truths taught by all the other faiths and philosophies, Oriental, African or Occidental, and by modern science as well. We do not reject Christian truth! We gladly embrace it! We bow to none in our reverence and respect for Jesus’ life and thought! We are not less than Christian, but more!”

“Unitarian now stands not only for the oneness of God, but for the *unitary* view of life, the merging of the sacred and secular into a single substance, every particle of which is sacred. It

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<sup>2</sup> “Unitarian Universalism Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow” by Rev. Donald Szantho Harrington, pages 3, 6, 7, and 10.

affirms the unitary nature of the universe and everything in it as the single Sacred Reality whose physical and spiritual laws set the bounds of our being, within whose Meaning and Ultimate Purpose, our little lives find their significance. It seeks the unitary dimension of experience, that *depth within* – which is universal to all men and therefore unitive. It celebrates the *unitary* character of the human family, rejoicing that no matter what our race or faith or condition, we are all one people, belonging to the single Family of Man.”

“Universalism has grown beyond the idea of universal salvation to embrace the concept of the universality of truth. Truth is not sectarian, different for a Christian, a Buddhist, or a Jew. Truth is universal! It is progressively discovered and formulated by men of all faiths, and, when substantiated, it is the same for all men everywhere. With each passing year, and with the certainty of a slowly-emerging, single, scientific, world culture, the universality of truth will grow more and more apparent, and its impact will be more and more realized within man’s religious life . . . We dedicate our allegiance to the new Unitarian Universalist Association, and pledge our lives, our fortunes and our faith to its high purposes and sure upbuilding.”

When people turn 50, they sometimes are the recipients of good natured ribbing about being over the hill about to tumble down that hill into decrepitude and irrelevance. There is nothing wrong with good natured ribbing at being 50 years old as long as we do not take the jokes to heart. For individuals, the big 5 – 0 is a mark of maturity, not a marker for decline. We may not be quite as physically strong, emotionally volatile, or spiritually adrift as in our younger years, but we can start to evidence the subtle marinade of maturity.

Unitarian Universalism, too, has been in a marinade for 50 years. Unitarian Universalism, too, is starting to evidence the subtle marinade of maturity. Unitarianism and Universalism began as separate flavors of liberal Christianity. Unitarian Universalism is blending into a tangy post-Christian maturity which tickles the taste buds and attracts seekers of a non-doctrinaire yet religiously grounded way to help make the world a better place and to help make us better people.

There is in the 50-year-old Unitarian Universalist marinade something satisfying for all taste buds, including sour, salty, sweet, bitter, and umami taste buds. You may not yet have heard about umami taste buds. Wikipedia informs us that “Until the 2000s, the number of "basic" tastes was considered to be four (bitterness, saltiness, sourness, and sweetness). More recently, a fifth taste, "savory" or "umami," has been proposed by a large number of authorities associated with this field.”<sup>3</sup>

“It can be tasted in cheese and soy sauce, and while also found in many other fermented and aged foods this taste is also present in tomatoes, grains, and beans . . . A loanword from Japanese meaning "good flavor" or "good taste", *Umami* is considered fundamental to many Eastern cuisines and was first described in 1908, although it was only recently recognized in the West as a basic taste.”

Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Owen-Towle has distilled the insights of his 44 years in parish ministry into a book titled *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*. Tom Owen-Towle describes himself this way: “My life-journey has been one extended wrestling match with God – starting with an early mindless embrace to categorical rejection, then gradually yet resolutely proceeding toward my current status as a questioning believer or trustful agnostic. I’m a theological hybrid who chooses to juggle live paradoxes concerning the Holy. I dwell at peace with Walt Whitman’s claim: ‘Do I contradict myself? Yes, I contain multitudes!’”<sup>4</sup>

Tom Owen-Towle’s main point is that Unitarian Universalism is growing up. He organizes the book according to 26 theological themes. The themes reminded me of the sour, salty, sweet, bitter, and umami flavors. For example, suffering is sour, grace is salty, gratitude is sweet, evil is bitter. Umami? The savory? That is mystery and wonder, called “God” by some. Mystery and wonder are nothing if not savory.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taste>

<sup>4</sup> *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism* by Tom Owen-Towle, Flaming Chalice Press, San Diego, California, 2011, p. 83.

Human beings did not acquire a new type of taste bud about 10 years ago, when “umami” began to be noticed. It was there all along. As Unitarian Universalism matures, the savory taste that some call God emerges from the marinade of the Modern era and helps to usher in Postmodernity. Tom Owen-Towle puts it this way: “When focusing on where to look for God in the crazy tangle of the cosmic web, it’s seductive to fixate on familiar and flamboyant haunts, such as natural beauty, sexual communion, musical epiphanies, truth-speaking, and deeds of goodness. While conceding the richness of well-trod avenues to Divine Presence, the challenge of Unitarian Universalism remains to stalk the Holy in fresh hangouts, such as service, laughter, materiality, turmoil, quietude, and surrender . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Tom Owen-Towle had a terrific vantage point from which to taste the increasing maturity of UU marinade. He was member of the Commission on Appraisal, a body appointed by the UUA Board of Trustees and charged with studying and reporting upon whatever in the Unitarian Universalist universe the committee thought needs attention.

For three years, from 2006 to 2009, the Commission worked on a revision to the seven UU Principles and six Sources. They gathered input from hundreds of congregations, dozens of affinity groups, and thousands of individuals. The Commission’s proposed replacement of the Principles and Sources was hotly debated at the General Assembly in Salt Lake City. Hundreds of delegates from over 1,000 congregations voted. The proposed replacement lost by only 13 votes.

Half the people in the plenary hall were disappointed. I was among the other half – the half who were relieved. I concurred with other humanists that the replacement language did not adequately emphasize the importance of humanism within Unitarian Universalism. Humanism stalks the Holy in fresh hangouts. Humanism stalks the Holy not as an end in itself, but as a means to reduce pain and suffering.

Tom Owen-Towle observes, “Life’s marked by three recurring themes: anticipated loss, loss itself, and grieving over loss . . . Our losses are legion and daily. Lost time. Lost limbs. Lost

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<sup>5</sup> *Theology Ablaze*, p. 90

momentum. Lost memory. Lost faith. Lost friends. Lost jobs. Lost loves. Lost hair. Lost innocence. Lost children. Lost money. Lost energy. Lost dreams . . . On and on mounts the lousy litany of losses – some necessary yet others infuriatingly ill-timed.”<sup>6</sup> “Hence the key question in our theological search is simply this: can we build an altar from the broken fragments of our hearts? Are we brave enough to do so?”

“We can’t transcend suffering; however, we can sometimes transform it,” he writes. “The purpose of a theologically deepening existence is to manage comebacks, to be born again and again and again . . . Our human dignity lies neither in innocence nor in despondency but in new beginnings, in being scarred and healed a thousand times, in becoming seasoned, gnarled persons.”<sup>7</sup>

This rings true as a bell for me – actually, true as a symphony of bells. What do we want to be when we grow up? It is time we started saying, “I want to be a seasoned, gnarled person.” What future do we hope for regarding Unitarian Universalism?” It is time we started saying we want it to be a seasoned, gnarled religion that does not waste any individual’s pain, nor does it waste the world’s pain. Unitarian Universalists can transform pain into resiliency, emotional devastation into hope.

Our unique niche in the religious landscape is help the sorrows of *secular* people ripen by passing them directly through our bodies and hearts in ever more skillful ways. One bloc of our people are “spiritual but not religious” people, yes. Another bloc of our people are neither spiritual *nor* religious. They (and we) face existential questions that Unitarian Universalism is prepared to receive and hold, sensing and honoring the sweetness, sourness, bitterness, saltiness, and umami in our hearts, thereby transforming pain into hope.

I conclude on a note of warning. This is a traditional story retold by Margaret Silf. “There once was a rich man who had no greater desire than to do good to those around him, and especially to those who worked for him. He noticed that one of his workers, a carpenter, was very poor, and

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<sup>6</sup> *Theology Ablaze*, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> *Theology Ablaze*, p. 158.

was struggling to feed his family. He could see for himself that the hovel in which the man lived with his wife and children was falling into disrepair and was no longer a match for the cold and the rain that beat down upon it. He felt great compassion for the carpenter and his family, and he had an idea.”<sup>8</sup>

“He called the carpenter to him one morning and gave him these instructions: ‘I want you to build me a beautiful house,’ he said. ‘I want you to spare no expense and to employ only the best craftsmen for every job that is needed. I have to make a journey, and I will be away for a while, but when I come back, I want you to have the house ready for me.’

The carpenter was delighted to be given this task. Immediately he set to work, and, knowing that the master would be away, he decided to make a good profit on this enterprise. Instead of hiring the best craftsmen and using the finest materials, he cut corners wherever he possibly could. The master would never know, and he could keep the difference and make a lot of money for himself.

And so the house was built. From the outside, it looked beautiful, but as the carpenter well knew, it was not at all sound. The timbers in the roof were weak and badly fitted. The bricks were seconds, which would soon begin to crumble. The roof tiles were rejects from the quarry. The building had been carried out by inexperienced workers for low pay.

When the master returned, he came to inspect the house. ‘I have done as you instructed,’ the carpenter told him. ‘I have used the best materials and the finest craftsmen.’ ‘I’m delighted to hear it,’ said the master. ‘Here are the keys. The house is yours. It is my gift to you and your family. May it be a fine home for you for the rest of your life.’ And in the years that followed, the carpenter could often be heard to mutter, under his breath, ‘If only I had known that the house was meant for me . . .’

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<sup>8</sup> *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World* compiled by Margaret Silf, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 2003, page 100

The house of Unitarian Universalism is our house. May we build it and maintain it with care and integrity. May we be brave enough to build an altar from the broken fragments of our hearts.

May it be so!