

I take my authority in the pulpit today from our denomination that originated with lay people, and not clergy. The first ministers of the Universalist Church, were outsiders from the Standing Order in 1820s Hartford. They drew on their experiences; they did not study religion in the University, but were self taught. Their message was

- radical,
- their scope was wide, and
- their words came from the heart.

I come before you today as someone who stumbled upon this faith. Life experience and study have allowed and encouraged me to embrace it.

My task today is to think about how we worship together week after week with such diverse beliefs. How do we walk together when we have no creed?

This morning I want to lead you through my walk, its intersection with yours and with our Universalist church history dating back to the 1790s.

So, walk with me.

How many of you like to take a walk? Raise your hand!

Why do we walk?

There are lots of answer to this question -- we can think of some of them. . .

- to get somewhere
- to get away from somewhere
- to live in harmony with nature
- to see the world from a different point of view
- to have quiet time
- to have time with a fellow walker
- to go down a well worn path
- to make a new path
- to be renewed
- to follow in someone else's footsteps
- to discover new things

These literal reasons for taking a walk fit with our spiritual journeys as well - to be alone and to be together, to walk a well worn path and to wear a new path, to follow in someone else's footsteps, to

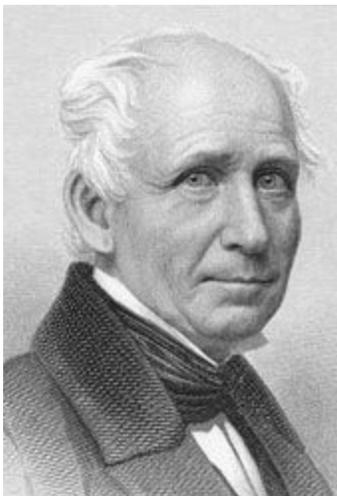
discover a new path, and to see the world from a different point of view. Some of these ideas will resonate with each of us; some more one Sunday than another, some more at one age than another.

In my experience as a historian, I, like most, research and ask questions of the past based on the present. We think we can find out something about why we are where we are today by knowing more about the path we walked. And, we like to think that, knowing this information helps us think about where we want to go.



Our church's journey started back in the 1790s. Then Elhanan Winchester, one of two Universalist preachers in America, came and preached in Hartford. Winchester spoke of God as love and many of those in the Calvinist Congregational Churches of the time listened. Winchester's message disrupted traditional ideas about damnation and hell and an all powerful judging God.

These ideas, once planted, did not go away. About 20 years later, in 1821, 195 years ago, Minister Hosea Ballou visited Hartford. He was ordained by Winchester, and at the height of his influence as a Universalist Minister. The South Church was fertile ground for Ballou's beliefs and message. He preached his message of love and universal salvation drawing large crowds. Ballou visited the grave of Elhanan Winchester, in Hartford's Ancient Burying Ground, remembering the path Winchester had walked.



Before Ballou left town, a delegation of men, mostly from the South Congregational Church met with him.

They were Universalists, some since Winchester's preaching in the late 1790s. They said they wanted permanent Universalist preaching in Hartford. Six months later, in November 1821, Ballou sent Rev. Richard Carrique, to be our first minister. At first, he preached twice a month at the Old State House, and every Thursday at the South Congregational Church and wrote and published the Universalist Religious Inquirer every other week.

Six months after Carrique arrived, the Universalists tried to take over the South Congregational Church by asking for the pulpit two Sundays per month.

The congregation voted them down: they lost.

Carrique and at least 50 followers took a walk away from the South Congregational Church of Hartford. By 1823, they raised \$10,000 to build our church on Central Row right opposite the Old State House.

At that point, Hosea Ballou returned to celebrate proclaiming “the unchangeable, impartial love of God to all, the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting” for all people. Carrique and his followers made a new path and there were new discoveries ahead.

But still, these Universalists were outsiders who, even though they had their own building, were seen as well outside the mainstream. Carrique’s message placed their individual lives in a world which accepted all people and where God was love. To Carrique, God was good and there was universal salvation.

The faith of these universalists was so different, that Carrique had to caution his parishioners. He counseled them not to renounce other creeds. His people only needed their own reason for their faith. This faith, he argued, they could build without just blindly following a creed. People in Carrique’s congregation had to examine their systems of belief but it didn’t have to happen by denouncing the beliefs of others.

And yet, Carrique did do a bit of denouncing himself. The formation of our Universalists Church began, in part, as a reaction to the ideas and the preaching of the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival in which hellfire, damnation and a vengeful God played big roles. Reverend Carrique actually denounced the Great Awakening preachers who used emotional sermons to solidify people’s faith based on the fear of eternal damnation and not a faith based on a God of love. Universalism grew rapidly in reaction to these revivals, so much so that our second church on the site of the present day Travelers Tower downtown had seats for 1,000 people.



This theology caused Universalists to be feared and hated as both a direct attack on Puritan Calvinism and the new ideas of the Second Great Awakening. According to our early 20th century minister John Coleman Adams, “it was inevitable that the Universalist heretics from the ancient faith should suffer aspersion at the hands of those whose cherished dogmas they dared to doubt.”

Just as now, their church was not just about worship on Sunday. By 1832, the church women organized the first known Universalist Female Relief Society and the first women’s church organization in Hartford. They wanted to “relieve the poor, the sick & suffering, according to their ability.” At the first meeting, 135 women and

men subscribed and raised money to aid orphans and destitute children. These men and women looked for people with whom they could walk.

This story of the start of our church describes a walk away from the Congregationalists caused by powerful ideas about universal salvation and love.

These people found a new place where they could walk their faith in their deeds.

That is one of the things that attracted me to this church back in 1987. I grew up in an Episcopal Church. I was baptized, confirmed and became the first female acolyte in this church in 1970. I went on to Trinity College which had lost its Episcopalian affiliation at that point, but whose history had a comfort and appeal to me. After I got a teaching job in West Hartford, married, and moved to town, I, like many of you, went searching for a spiritual home.

I lived my spiritual life through my deeds in my teaching every day - through those relationships with students who were eager and those who tried to be invisible. I tried to make a connection with each one of them, through the content of history, and, as Wallace Fiske would say, the "touch of the hand." The more alienated the student, the more willing I had been to pick up the challenge of that relationship. But I also yearned for more.

I church shopped like many of you and found myself walking out saying, well I can believe about half, but I have to block out the other half.

When I walked into this sanctuary, it didn't take me long to understand that here I didn't have to block anything out. The building seemed familiar, there was a structure to the service that was familiar and the unison Lord's Prayer comforted me. I saw Jesus up here, and was familiar with him -- but puzzled about his role. The music provided a place for me to raise my untrained but willing voice with others.

I quickly got involved with the Board of Social Responsibility. There I met Ivan Lieben, Julia Shaw and many others who lived and walked their faith through their deeds - particularly at the South Park Inn.

Soon I had two sons, and this church became a real sanctuary for me. I could get an hour to myself - a time to meditate - from my hectic schedule of writing my dissertation, teaching and raising them. Through their education in the church school I learned about the 7 Principles as you see in your Order of Service.

From the sermons of Fred Lipp, Stephen Kendrick and Jan Nielsen I learned more about the sources of our faith:

- The first is “Direct experience” - that wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renew our spirits and be open to the forces which create and bring and support life; this I experienced in my daily life, in my familial relationships, and in my work as a teacher.
- The second is “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men” which challenged me to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. This source made a lot of sense to me because of my study of history, my focus particularly on women workers, woman suffragists, and African Americans in the civil rights movement. Again, this I walked in my daily life and Stephen Kendrick’s preaching supported this path.
- The third is Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; my study of African and Asian culture and history had opened my mind to the world religions and now I pondered these words on Sunday as well. Our Unitarian Universalist faith draws from the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism and Confucianism. Our opening hymn came from the mystic Sufi Rumi.
- The fourth is Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. This we are reminded of every Sunday when we walk into the sanctuary and see our stained glass with Jesus. These windows and those on the back staircase and the 2nd floor were brought here from our third building on Asylum Avenue in Hartford. They remind us of our Christian roots and the important lesson of the life Jesus walked. These windows allow us to take the best of the ideas of Christianity. When I look at these windows, it reminds me of a piece of the scripture from Matthew which guides my actions, where Jesus says “Whatever happens to the least of these, happens to me.”
- A fifth source of our tradition is Humanist teachings which counsel us to pay attention to reason and science. We think and debate in community to create meaning and values for this life in our relationships with others and through the power of love;

- The final source is the spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature, the changing of the seasons, of growing things in the earth - our water communion being a good example of this.

I learned that in our faith, we did not try to say one of these sources of faith was better than another, but we knew that each of us weighed them differently. My sources have changed as well, over the last 30 years.

My engagement in church was confined to Sundays and I knew little of the governance of the church or even about my own theology. I was a doer and felt pretty content living my faith in my deeds. I didn't have the time or confidence to be reflective except for that one hour every Sunday morning.

That changed 15 years ago when I took a metaphorical long walk with my mother when she was diagnosed with lung cancer and was given one year to live. I was lucky to have the chance to get to know her in a new way as she faced her death. In the summer of 2001, I saw her most every day as she turned from a guarded, determined, and proper woman to one who didn't mind going out in public with her oxygen tank, and made all visitors give her a hug before they left.

This walk with my mother, this life that my mother found in facing death changed me.

I thought, would I have any regrets if I died?

That brings me back to the church. On New Year's, 2002, Interim Minister Judith Walker-Riggs led a service in which she asked us what we wanted to get rid of in 2002. I can still feel myself writing "the tension in my home" on the 3 by 5 card she handed out. After the service, we walked out front in the cold, put them in a bucket and Judith set fire to them.

I left the church with a sense of calm.

Once home, I sat down to read the newspaper in front of the fire.

And, that same tension erupted just hours after I had let it go. Here I was, at a moment where my faith was being tested. I wanted to believe that burning up that "tension" would make it go away. It hadn't worked.

At that moment, my neighbor knocked on the door and asked me to go for a New Year's walk.

I walked. And, for the first time, I opened up about those tensions in a way that was unusual for me. This walk and many subsequent ones led me to understand that I had choices at home.

Burning those words hadn't eradicated the tension.

It did name them and that naming led to a process - a walk - that continued for the next 10 months, leading me out of my marriage. The church continued to be my sanctuary and as I broke through the emotional walls that I had built up to survive, I felt lucky that Jan Nielsen became our new minister. Jan's sermons encouraged me to feel as much as to think.

My neighbor - who walked me on this journey - became my wife, Jan Nielsen married us, and the church welcomed us as it became OUR spiritual home. I continued to find this sanctuary a place where I was accepted, where I could meditate, where I could look at the birch tree from the same pew each week, and a place to make connections with people in the congregation. This was the first place in public that Beth and I felt supported as a lesbian couple. For over a decade we have been a welcoming congregation, inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people.

In the past few years, as I have joined the leadership of the church in my role since 2012 on our Board, the church is playing an even more important role in my life. Now I am part of a group of people who build a community which encourages others to walk together on this spiritual journey, living our faith in our deeds.

When I agreed to be co-Moderator with Jon last August, I didn't know that it would bring me here. I really hadn't "built my own theology." But, my deeds as a leader have led me to a deeper understanding of Unitarian Universalism.

So where am I on this journey?

Now, I walk with my son Adam - he walked for miles with me as we talked about this sermon. He thinks deeply about all things religious. Walking with him makes me think of the Hindu belief about the four stages of life.

The Hindus say that in the first period of life, it is time to grow up and with the support of our parents, learn a skill, get educated, and prepare for our future.

In the second period of life we use these skills for the good of the community and to make money so we can live and raise a family.

The third period of life, is a time to leave worldly possessions behind and pursue inner wisdom. I see myself both here and in the fourth phase of life: a time to return to the community, guiding and supporting the community with the inner wisdom that we attained.

These phases speak to me as I make my way in retirement and understand and use this wisdom.

Now back to the original question: What keeps us together in our religious diversity, in this walk that I am suggesting that we take together?

It struck me that at various times in my life here on Fern Street, I have been a liberal Christian, a Theist, a Mystic, centered in nature, and a religious humanist. This faith and this community has supported me and brought me along on this journey.

Unitarian Universalist historian Conrad Wright believed in the power of our human institutions - our churches - to amplify and extend our commitments beyond one lifetime. He wrote that UUs did not believe together but that we walked together into the mysteries, fully respecting diversity, relishing the opportunity to learn from one another and vigorously discussing the issues that confront us.

In our 195 years as an institution, we remain committed to the ideals of our Universalist roots. Our building- and this is our fourth- outlasts its parishioners. As we learned from the children's story, it is more about who is inside than what it looks like on the outside. And what holds us on this walk is our journey together. As we prepare to call a new minister, I hope we can draw on these roots:

- God is love
- Every individual has worth
- The way to be happy is to do good
- We can deepen our understanding, expand our vision, and continue to re-evaluate the kind of lives we live
- As a free congregation, we covenant with each other, promising mutual trust and support on this walk.

So, thanks for staying with me down this winding path. I ask you to continue to join me in this walk, this doubting, this questioning, with this loving and supportive community.

I'll end by going back to my question about why we walk together and see how these concrete reasons are metaphors for our journey here. We walk:

- to get somewhere -- to a sanctuary

- We walk to get away from somewhere - from our tensions and fears
- We walk to live in harmony with nature - to learn to live in harmony with ourselves
- We walk to see the world from a different point of view - our 6 sources
- We walk to have quiet time - meditation
- We walk to have time with a fellow walker - to build our sense of community in the sanctuary and outside of the sanctuary - our volunteer workshop yesterday
- We walk to go down a well worn path - learn from our history
- We walk to make a new path - move forward and to think about what we need and want in our new minister
- We walk to be renewed - to be inspired to do good
- We walk to follow in someone else's footsteps - to gain wisdom from those who walked here before us
- We walk to discover a new path - to gain new insights

We walk on a path traveled and new, but rarely in a straight line.

“We walk living in love -- fearless, joyous and free;
in service to this glorious and wounded world.”

So may it be.

Tracey Wilson

Co Moderator, Universalist Church of West Hartford