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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kamloops, BC

Building Beloved Community:

The Amazing Legacy of Unitarian and Universalist Utopian Communities*

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We hear a lot of talk about “beloved community” around UU churches...about building it, seeking it, and standing up for it. I sometimes wonder if all this “beloved community” talk really has much substance. Unitarian Universalists sometimes can get stuck in abstract, idealistic intellectualism. We surely talk the talk, but occasionally struggle to move beyond talk.

Today, I want to talk about *Beloved Community*; what it really is, and how this small fellowship can reflect it actively and meaningfully. I want to bring you some examples of utopian communities from the past that grew out of a shared vision of Beloved Community.

The term, “Beloved Community” was coined by American philosopher Josiah Royce at the turn of the 19 century, but most of us learned about it from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who often spoke of the “Beloved Community” as his ultimate goal.

In part, here is what the King Centre says:

For Dr. King, The Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom.... Rather, The Beloved Community was for him a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

Sounds like the world we all want.

For hundreds of years our faithful Unitarian and Universalist ancestors have rallied around issues of peace, fighting racism, oppression, and injustice at every step.

We continue similar work through campaigns like Standing on the Side of Love, Black Lives Matter, Truth & Reconciliation, and responding to problems like environmental exploitation that threatens the health and future of our land, water, and people.

These responses come from individuals, groups, and congregations acting on their principles and values. Unitarian Universalists certainly don't *agree* on every issue...but we *do* agree to the covenants that guide our relationships and the democratic processes by which we make decisions.

I want you to imagine for a minute that the service has ended and we finished our cups of coffee and tea and put away the chairs and hymnals. But, instead of heading out the door to our respective homes, instead of going off separately, we stay together... stay and make supper together, help the kids with their homework, share the chores, pool our money to pay the bills and buy staples, maybe plant a garden together.

Sounds wild, eh? But maybe not. When I "discovered" Unitarian Universalism and first landed at the Halifax church, I plunged in with insatiable enthusiasm. I joined committees, led projects, became part of the choir, attended groups... I couldn't get enough of the well-being I felt at the Halifax church. It was all about the people, their openness to different ideas and beliefs, and their acceptance, affirmation, and support. I could be myself; nobody was put off by my righteous ideas and rebel spirit. And I began to fantasize about making it my whole life, *living* with the people of my UU community 24 seven. Instead, I joined the ministry. My enthusiasm persists; I'm just pacing myself a little better.

Turns out, I'm not the only one who's felt that impulse to live and breathe the ethos of a particular community. Some have acted on that impulse.

The Hopedale Community was founded out of Worcester County, Massachusetts in 1842 by Adin Ballou, one of the many relations of Hosea Ballou, the leading theologian and evangelist of early 19th-century Universalism;

Adin and his followers bought 600 acres of land on which they built homes for the community members, chapels and the factories for which the company was initially formed.

Ballou believed that he could create a utopian community blending the features of a factory town with those of a religion-based commune. He called this "Practical Christianity" but unlike several similar communities, it was important to Ballou that *Hopedale* not become isolated from the rest of society. He hoped that it would be able to stand as a beacon of social reform in the time of the Civil War. Hopedale stood for temperance, abolitionism, woman's rights, spiritualism and education.

The Christian Universalist lifestyle at Hopedale was more concerned with equality, love and sharing than it was about the dogmas of religion.

In his book, *Practical Christian Socialism*, Ballou outlined principles in the areas of: theology, personal righteousness, and social order. I will only name a few from each area:

- The existence of one All-Perfect Infinite God.
- The moral agency and religious obligation of mankind.
- The final universal triumph of good over evil.

In the 8 *Principles of Personal Righteousness*...Ballou named:

- Justice to all beings.
- Truth in all manifestations of mind.
- Love in all spiritual relations.
- Patience in all right aims and pursuits.
- Unceasing progress towards perfection.

Then in the *Principles of Social Order*, Ballou listed some foundational Universalist beliefs:

- The supreme Fatherhood of God.
- The universal Brotherhood of Man.
- The declared perfect love of God to Man.
- The required perfect love of Man to Man
...and so forth.

The language is 180 years old, so not inclusive; Unitarian Universalism no longer has creedal statements, but we can still see that traditional, liberal (Universalist) theology reflected in our principles.

The Transcendentalist movement was in full swing when Unitarian minister George Ripley founded Brook Farm in 1841 in the rural Boston suburb of West Roxbury.

Transcendentalism was an intellectual philosophical movement of liberal thinkers who asserted high powers of dignity and “integrity of the soul”. Strongly idealistic, Transcendentalists focused on the power of thought and free will, and inspiration.

The Brook Farm community wasn’t unique for its time—more than 80 utopian communities were launched in the 1840s alone—but it was the first purely secular one. Members farmed the land together and held the fruits of their labor in common. The idea was that this would give settlers more time to pursue their own literary and scientific interests, which would then benefit the rest of humankind.

Author, Nathaniel Hawthorne was an original shareholder in Brook Farm. Notable visitors to Brook Farm included Unitarians, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, and Theodore Parker, all part of the transcendentalist movement.

Brook Farm attract intellectuals—but there were also farmers, and craftsmen and teachers among the 70 or 80 members.

They practiced a modern, liberal educational theory in their schools, which sought to establish *“perfect freedom of relations between students and teaching body.”*

Within three years the community had adopted some of the theories of the French Socialist, Charles Fourier—they added houses, workrooms, and dormitories, then put all available funds into constructing a large central building....which burned to the ground as its completion was being celebrated.

Brook Farm struggled on for a while, but gradually failed; the land and buildings were sold in 1849, eight years after it had first begun.

More recently, a number of groups of Unitarian Universalists have come together in a variety of intentional and collective living arrangements, and for different reasons. They begin with some sort of spiritual, or moral, ethical, intellectual, environmental, or social vision that motivates their commitment.

There’s been an upswing in the trend of modifying older UU church buildings as well as creating new construction projects that are multi-purpose in function; some incorporate residential living space, community gathering space, small businesses, non profit agencies, space for artists and musicians, and other compatible partners and neighbours.

Unitarian House of Ottawa for example is a senior’s residence affiliated with the local Ottawa church.

The Lucy Stone Cooperative is an intentional community of cooperative homeowners in Roxbury Mass. based on the values and tradition of Unitarian Universalism. Their second cooperative came together when a group of UUs sought to move away from consumerism and individualism, and raise children in a community that recognizes interdependence within and between families. They are walking the talk of Beloved Community.

There is a humanist Unitarian intentional spiritual community in the US whose members participate in daily spiritual practices, and live cooperatively in a combination of shared and private space.

The First Unitarian church of Portland, Oregon occupies a whole city block; their complex includes venues dedicated to education, sustainability, social justice, the arts, and community building. When I visited there a few years ago, I was impressed that they run a

daytime drop in centre for homeless.

Increasingly, people are seeking ways to be mutually supportive of individual needs, and rejecting institutionalism that warehouses the elderly, people with disabilities, or those who cannot afford to live independently. They are striving to improve quality of life, to increase independence, wanting to be less lonely, and trying to retain a sense of dignity and purpose and belonging.

What does it take for a group of Unitarian Universalists to decide that Sunday is not enough...that they want and need more? What does living together, pooling resources, sharing responsibilities, working and playing together, bring to individual lives?

I believe it is an attempt at what theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman called, *creative interchange*. As I mentioned last Sunday Creative Interchange allows one to discover "God"—that is, God understood as, *"that creative good which transforms us in ways in which we cannot transform ourselves."*

Wieman tells us that creative interchange is *when we find one or more people with whom we feel comfortable enough to engage at a deep and profound level, creating in each an awareness of the original experience of the other person.*

Creative interchange, or Beloved Community, is about wanting to be stronger, better, in committed relationship with others.

How does this Fellowship build Beloved Community? I think it begins by naming who we already are. Reminding ourselves of what we are doing well...

Our Theology without Borders program --- that welcomes people of all faiths, and worldviews to the table to discuss life's issues and big questions. Our soon to hatch, Mess-It-Up all ages program where we will offer hospitality with a simple meal, and space for creative activities where strangers can develop new connections and friends can expand their existing relationships

The book group where people come together around a common read...

And certainly, we can be proud of our monthly spiritual giving practice.

We Share Our Plate monthly with organizations that provide services and programs that help local people, our neighbours. We recognize that others are better equipped to help, yet as a Fellowship, we do not refuse to do what we can do.

We change the world simply by doing our best and becoming our better selves...we build Beloved Community through creative interchange and through creative interchange we build Beloved Community.

It's not always easy; it requires checking our egos, and not only *willingness* to make compromises, but the capacity to compromise with love, joy, and equanimity.

The I and Thou emerge to We; our separate fires become one flame.

May it be so, and amen.

Resources:

Cooperative information (list of links to many resources)

<https://uucommunitycoops.org/cooperative-information/>