

John Murray's Universalist Journey

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Transformation is our springtime theme of the month. We celebrate nature's renewal of a world once bare and drab into a rich tapestry of color and fragrance. Flowers bloom, birds sing, and thoughts of love arise in the hearts of many creatures – even humans.

Nature's renewal can teach us the true meaning of being born again. Autumn's death precedes winter's despair that dissolves into the surprisingly joyous rebirth of life and hope and wonder in the spring. Robert Hardies, the Senior Minister of All Souls Church in Washington, D.C., says that he comes "down on the side of ee Cummings, who once wrote: 'We can never be born enough.' We can never be born enough. The soul – the curious soul, at least, the alive soul – always longs to be made new. To be ever-more whole. To be reborn. Not because we were born wrong the first time, but because we grow and learn and change. And so my wish for us is that we be born again . . . and again . . . and again. . . . That's what we who have chosen the liberal religious path have gotten ourselves into. Because it is not a path that offers us a once and for all answer to our questions. The motto of the great 16th century Unitarian reformer, Francis David, was 'semper reformanda.' Always reforming. His motto could be ours today."

It certainly could have been the motto of the person considered to be the founder of the Universalist church in America, John Murray. His life journey contained so many twists and turns, starts and stops, endings and rebirths that he truly can serve as an example of the never-ending reformation that is at the heart of our religious tradition.

Finding most books about John Murray to be out of print, I turned for my research to The Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography, the Judith Sargent Murray Society, and various scattered quotations from his autobiography that I found here and there.

Consider his beginnings. John Murray was born the eldest of nine children to an upper-class family in Alton, England. While his mother was affectionate, his

father was a strict Calvinist whose fears for John's soul led him to beat and isolate his son. Part of the problem was Murray's bright and open manner that led him to make friends easily, which his father considered to be disturbingly outgoing. Murray wrote about his father, saying, "I was studious to avoid his presence, and I richly enjoyed his absence."

The family moved to Cork, Ireland when he was eleven. He continued his schooling but his father refused to let him enroll in a course that would have prepared him for a college education.

It was here that he had his first encounter with a different religious tradition – Methodists. He was attracted to their services, which were more social and musical than the severity of the Anglican Church he'd known. It was here that he met John Wesley, the Methodist evangelist, who saw great potential in the teenaged boy. Wesley recruited Murray to lead a religious education class of forty boys, leading them in song, prayer, and discussions of spiritual development. It was here, under John Wesley's warm and gracious influence, that Murray began his journey into the ministry. But it wasn't a straight line.

It was here that a Methodist family, the Littles, saw his potential to become a bright and shining light. They opened their extensive library to him, beginning his self-directed literary education, and by the age of eighteen years he was preaching to large audiences in Cork.

When Murray was nineteen, his father's death brought radical changes. As the eldest son, he was expected to take charge of the family. But he felt incapable of disciplining his younger siblings, perhaps because of his unwillingness to emulate his father's harsh and violent behavior. He accepted the Littles' invitation to move in with them as one of their children. He enjoyed the refuge but not the daughter that they expected him to marry.

This, coupled with growing doubts about John Wesley's theology, led him into a deep depression, but, believing there was a higher purpose for him, he decided to leave Ireland and move to England. On the way he heard a sermon by the Methodist preacher George Whitefield and was impressed by his welcoming style. Intrigued by this independent spirit, he sought Whitefield's Tabernacle in London, and was often sent out to lead worship – a talented, popular evangelical.

Again, his easygoing and winning personality brought him friends everywhere he went, but apparently little money. When the small nest egg the Littles had given him ran out, he took a number of jobs, including textile manufacturing. Murray hated the drudgery of this work, but loved the religious atmosphere at Whitefield's Tabernacle. His growing popularity led to more and more opportunities to preach.

As sometimes happens, John fell in love with a young woman who came to hear him preach, Eliza Neale, and they eventually married despite her family's strong objections to their daughter marrying someone as immoral as a Methodist.

John and Eliza had heard about a Welsh preacher named James Rely, who was preaching a doctrine of universal salvation. He naturally despised this – and Rely – and set out to save a young Methodist woman who had been lured away from the Tabernacle. Murray was surprisingly ineffective. He lost the argument, reflecting afterwards that, “Here I was extremely embarrassed, and most devoutly wished myself out of her habitation; I sighed bitterly, expressed deep commiseration for those souls who had nothing but head-knowledge; drew out my watch, discovered it was late; and, recollecting an engagement, observed it was time to take leave.”

Despite losing the argument, he resolutely continued to resist Rely's theology. But he did consider it. Murray and his wife began a lengthy study of Rely's arguments, listened to him preach, and read literature both for and against, hoping to find a flaw in this disturbingly optimistic Universalist reasoning. John recalled this transformation, saying, “The veil was taken from my heart. It was clear, as any testimony in divine revelation, that Christ Jesus, died for all, for the sins of the whole world . . . and that everyone one . . . must finally be saved.” Everyone would be saved – no exceptions. This was the new vision that cast aside all idea of hell as eternal punishment, a just and forgiving God eventually embracing all in his transforming love.

The Methodists kicked him out of the Tabernacle.

Murray's contentment with life soon ended abruptly when his infant son died. Eliza's health declined and they moved to the country, hiring nurses and renting a comfortable cottage but these efforts were not enough. Eliza died, leaving

John heartbroken and debt-ridden. Shortly thereafter he learned of the deaths of four of his siblings. He was thrown into debtor's prison. Although his brother-in-law eventually rescued him, he remained too depressed to engage in preaching the doctrine of universal salvation that Rely encouraged him to take up. He wished "to pass through this life, unheard, unseen, unknown to all, as though I ne'er had been." Now, that's depressed.

In 1770 he resolved to quit his life in the old world and start afresh in the new. With no connections or plans, John boarded the brig Hand-in-Hand bound for New York, serving as its business manager.

This journey led to one of the most-beloved legends in Universalist history. Just before New York, the ship ran aground on a sandbar off the New Jersey coast. Becalmed and unable to free themselves, they soon ran out of provisions. You couldn't just call AAA in 1770; they had to fend for themselves. They sent out foraging parties to the farms and villages on the coast to see if they could find food for the crew.

The story goes that Murray knocked on the door of an elderly farmer named Thomas Potter, who opened it with the question, "Are you the preacher sent by God to preach the doctrine of universal salvation in my meeting house?" Stunned, Murray demurred, admitting that he had done some preaching in the past but that was all behind him now.

Potter responded, "The wind will never change, sir, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting-house, a message from God." The wind did not change and the boat remained stuck for days. Murray was enough of a believer in God's intervening hand to relent, and he delivered the sermon that Sunday. That afternoon the wind changed, the boat was freed, and the journey to New York completed. This is often called the first Universalist miracle.

And John Murray, too, felt his sense of calling and purpose return. He hadn't realized that Universalism was not unknown in America. Although there was no organized church, there was a receptive audience waiting for him when he arrived.

Although Potter begged Murray to remain in New Jersey, John was soon invited to speak in cities and towns in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. He had to go. Even though

he was attracting fierce opposition from established clergy wherever he went, the public resonated to his powerful preaching style. He was preaching in Boston in 1774 when he met the wealthy merchant, Winthrop Sargent, who invited him to preach in nearby Gloucester, Massachusetts. This group had formed to study Rely's theology and were excited to hear from someone closer to the source.

Murray wrote of the experience, "I . . . was received by a very few warm-hearted Christians. . . the heart, of the then head of the Sargent family, with his highly accomplished, and most exemplary lady, were open to receive me. . . The writings of Mr. Rely were not only in their hands but in their hearts."

He also met their daughter, Judith Sargent Stevens, that day, not suspecting the role she would come to play in later his life.

Murray settled in Gloucester but things were neither simple nor peaceful there, as protests arose against his ministry. There was a pamphlet entitled, in the language of the time, "Mr. Murray unmask'd: in which among other things, is shewn, that his doctrine of universal salvation, is inimical to virtue, and productive of all manner of wickedness; and that Christians of all denominations out to be on their guard against it."

His followers were threatened with excommunication and he was accused of being an English spy. Murray secured a position as chaplain with the Continental Army where the demands to have him expelled (again) were silenced only by the direct intervention of George Washington on his behalf. He was later brought before the Committee of Public Safety on charges of being a seditious Englishman until his friend, the General Nathaniel Greene, spoke on his behalf.

Still the struggles continued. In 1778 the established church's campaign against the small group of Gloucester Universalists escalated, following through on a threat to expel them from church membership – an act of potentially enormous legal and social consequences at the time. Instead of renouncing their faith, however, they organized their own religious society: the Independent Church of Christ and called John Murray as their pastor.

This led to years of contentious legal disputes. Because churches were considered to be the necessary moral foundation of society, they were supported by local taxes. But the Universalists had refused to pay taxes to the First Parish Church,

whose theology they opposed. The town seized and auctioned some of their personal property and the Universalists sued the parish for its return appealed to the state for their rights. They eventually won the lengthy trial.

Unitarians often tell of the noble struggles for legitimacy that they faced. They cite the Dedham court decision of 1820 that gave them the right to control their meetinghouses and exempt them from the taxation for support of the established Congregational church. But for some reason, we rarely cite the 1786 Universalist decision that served as a precedent for that case.

The opposition still didn't cease. It actually increased. Faced with further threats, Murray was advised to leave Gloucester for his own safety. In 1788 he decided chose to return to England to visit his mother whom he hadn't seen for eighteen years. But before he left, he wrote from Boston Harbor to the recently widowed Judith Sargent Stevens and asked her to marry him.

His return to England was surprisingly triumphant. He was frequently asked to preach and dubbed "the most popular preacher in the United States." When he heard that his American ministry had been declared legal he boarded a ship back to Boston, sharing the trip with John and Abigail Adams who were returning from an ambassadorial mission. The Adams heard John preach on the ship and struck up a friendship that lasted for many, many years.

Returning to Boston, he was honored by Governor John Hancock with a reception in his honor. All the hardships of the early years seemed to fall away, with his marriage to Judith Sargent Stevens and another, more traditional ordination service soon thereafter. The Gloucester Universalists proudly published notices of their pastor's installation to thwart any further challenges to his ministry.

Although his ministry was secure, there was no end to the theological turmoil that Universalism stimulated. It was considered simple common sense that the only reason people behaved morally was because they feared the punishments of eternal damnation and if that were removed, all morality would be lost. This was not the first nor would it be the last time that the motive forces of fear versus love would contend for people's hearts and minds. In fact, it continues to this day.

So when we choose to stand on the side of love, we take our place next to that courageous pioneer of compassionate freedom, John Murray, who is remembered

for having said, “Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

These are wonderful sentiments, and it’s likely that John Murray would have agreed with them – if he’d actually said them. He didn’t. Alfred S. Cole wrote it in 1951 for a biography of John Murray as part of a recreation of one of Murray’s sermons. Henry Cheetham, director of the Department of Education of the Unitarian Universalist Association, included it as a quotation in a pamphlet published in 1962, and it’s been repeated endlessly as fact ever since. Sort of like George Washington’s cherry tree.

One thing we do know for certain that John Murray did say comes from an incident that took place one time he spoke in Boston, when someone threw a rock through the window, intending to injure or intimidate him. Murray calmly stepped over to where the rock rested, picked it up and said, “This argument is solid, and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing. Not all the stones in Boston, except they stop by breath, shall shut my mouth, or arrest my testimony.”

John Murray: Anglican, Calvinist, Methodist, Universalist; relentless advocate for religious freedom. He traveled great distances in his heart and intellect as well as throughout the world and his legacy is still alive in us as we stand on the side of love, living the open-hearted Universalist foundation of Unitarian Universalism today.

May it be so.