



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

125 Years

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It appears to be built into our nature to divide time into segments. Seconds, minutes, days, weeks, months and years. Decades and centuries, millennia. Childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, old age. The baby boomers, the millenials, the me- generation. The age of bronze, the age of iron. The dark ages and the middle ages. The American century. A time to live and a time to die. The year of jubilation, the century of compassion, the lost generation.

I suppose all of this is to help us get a handle on the passage of time, which is perhaps, a way of dealing with our own death, or perhaps it is related to our need to feel at home in the world, know where we are, not just spatially but temporally. Time matters. The old saw is that life is a journey, which it truly is, and journeys take place in time – journey, journal, same root as jour, day in French.

It has been said that we spend the first thirty years of our life dreaming about the things we might have, the second thirty years getting those things, and the last thirty years getting rid of them. We will have a rummage sale here this spring. It is a part of our focus on spiritual practice.

Or, in Hinduism, we spend our life first as a child, then as a student, then a home maker/worker, and the last stage is as a wisdom seeker/teacher, the time when we renounce material pursuits and focus on spiritual pursuits. The Sanskrit word is sanyasin.

We have some of our sanyasins here – these past presidents, those who have been members for so many years. A lot of wisdom in this room.

And it just so happens that some scholars have divided Unitarian and Universalism into eras, with the modern era beginning in 1885, 125 years ago, coinciding with the establishment of Neighborhood Church. Coincidence? Mystery? Intelligent design?

A couple of footnotes: it is true that Neighborhood Church began in 1885, but it began as a Congregational Church and remained so until 1923-1924, when it merged with the newly formed Unitarian Church in town, and Neighborhood remained Unitarian and congregational until 1972 when we joined the Unitarian Universalist Association and dropped any connection with the Congregationalists.

So – while the first 90 or so years were Congregational and then Congregational Unitarian, there is 125 years of liberal religion represented in this congregation and that we can celebrate.

What was going on in 1885? Pasadena was not yet a city. It became a city the following year – a common story is that Pasadena incorporated in 1886 for the purpose of being able to shut the one saloon that existed. Throop church [named after Amos Throop, their great benefactor and founder of Throop Polytechnic Institute which later became Cal Tech] was organized in 1887, as a Universalist Church, and they soon built a church seating 1000 people near the corner of Walnut and Raymond. They never filled it, and, a bit later, they sold the building to the Nazarenes [who latter moved to Sierra Madre Villa] and built their current building on Los Robles and Del Mar.

The Neighborhood Church building was also built in 1887, at the corner of Pasadena Ave and California – many of the stained glass windows around are from that building; this pulpit and this table, some of the pews here and there, the big bell outside the door.

The newly merged Congregation in 1924 was known was the Union Liberal Church of Pasadena, and the minister was Bradford Leavitt, a Unitarian. The budget that year as \$14,233.43. Robert Milliken, future Nobel Laureate, was a trustee. William Blair was an instrumental member in the merger of the Congregationalists and the Unitarians – Blair High School was later named after him.

Membership went up and down, reaching a high in the low 700s in the 1950s and dropping into the 400s by the 1960s. The largest number reported was 732 in 1959. We are currently at 721. The 710 freeway was planned to run through the old church and this property was bought in 1969, just after Brandy Lovely was called as minister. In 1972 this building was completed and the congregation moved and the buildings were dedicated on November 19, 1972.

That same year, a Black Caucus was formed at the church to encourage greater diversity.

An aside here – we have become more diverse in the last five or so years, and this is a good thing, I believe. Much credit goes to the Neighborhood People of Color for their work and their witness. We want to do more – to explore issues of racism and multi-culturalism, issues of ethnicity. What it means, in these changing times, to be a diverse community, and how we can expand the dialogue about difference.

There is danger in our country around this now. The attacks on our president, many of them racial in nature, the anti-Muslim fervor, the anti-immigrant hysteria – these are real. Next Sunday at 5:30, Neighborhood People of Color will host a taco dinner [\$5 a person please] and we want to have a dialogue about where we are and what we might do. Please come. This matters a lot to me, and it can to all of us.

So here we are. 125 years of liberal religion. In 1885, Huck Finn was published and the Mikado by Gilbert and Sullivan had its premier. The first successful appendectomy was performed in Iowa. AT&T was incorporated, and the Washington Monument was dedicated, and Native Americans became official wards of the US government. Kodak manufactured its first commercial motion picture film. The stature of Liberty arrived in the US and the first motorcycle was produced by Daimler in Germany – paving the way for our own motorcycle gang here at Neighborhood.

Professional baseball salaries were set at \$1000-2000 per year. Two of the top songs that year were *The Gum Tree Canoe* and *Remember Boy, You're Irish*.

So here we are, still a beacon of liberal religion in Pasadena and the San Gabriel Valley. I like to tell my friends at All Saints Episcopal that we are the real liberal church in Pasadena. We are currently the largest Unitarian Universalist Church in California, the third largest in the west [after Portland and Seattle]. We are committed, as always, to the free expression of faith, to justice and equity and peace, to education and learning, to caring for the earth.

Around 1886, when Gannett was writing his 'Things Commonly Believed,' our faith was going through a period of controversy, known as the Western Controversy. Led by Gannett and Jenkins Lloyd Jones. Jones was Uncle to Frank Lloyd Wright, and headed up the Western Unitarian Conference – west being west of the Mississippi. He was born in Wales, grew up on a farm in Wisconsin, became a Unitarian Minister, served congregations in Wisconsin and Illinois [the west, you know] and then helped organize Unitarians in the Plains and west.

For a hundred years our faith had been concentrated in the East. It was primarily Christian. Emerson and Thoreau, notwithstanding, while not Trinitarian, Unitarians mostly believed in God, the Bible and the example of Jesus. Theodore Parker – this is the 200th anniversary of his birth – had thrown a wrench into our faith, by claiming that Jesus did not have to have existed, that there were truths beyond the witness of the Biblical narrative. He claimed that all of the miracles were fantasy and that our faith was centered on salvation by character and right action, our beliefs determined by reason, our churches by common agreement to principle.

Jones, who fought in the Civil War, at Vicksburg and the siege of Atlanta, inherited Parker's mantle. Prophetic preacher, he affirmed that religion is primarily ethical; there is no faith without action. Doctrine is second to ethics – this is the beginning of modern Unitarianism, the notion that religion is more about how we live than what we profess to believe; it is ethical more than it is intellectual. Jones supported

women in ministry – the Iowa sisterhood, a band of pioneering women clergy, found important support from Jones. He urged acceptance of people of color into our congregations; he was an ardent supporter of Hull House in Chicago.

And he believed that religion was an on-going story. It was not locked up in dogma or in a two thousand year old story. There was wisdom there, to be sure, as there was in ancient stories from around the world, but times change and we learn and grow. Remember that this is the generation of Darwin, and it was the Unitarians [of which Darwin was one] and leaders like Jones who wanted our minds to remain open to new discoveries and ideas.

125 years of liberal religion. Liberal has come to be a bad word these days, but we carry it proudly. We are a liberal faith community; liberal religion is what we profess here. Liberal as in generous or bountiful; or befitting a free person, as opposed to servile, as in open-minded and free from prejudice. Liberal. We are liberals here.

Liberal, liberal, liberal! Got it? Not progressive, though we are that too, but liberals. So when people ask who Unitarian Universalists are, tell them we are liberals, that we believe in the freedom of belief, in inclusion, not exclusion, that we believe in justice and equity for all, that doubting is as important as believing, that we should use our mind in faith, that it matters what we do, that no faith has an exclusive claim to the truth, that God is a liberal too. When they ask you what kind of a church you go to, tell them you go to a liberal church.

125 years here in Pasadena. 125 years, some of them more liberal than others, but a century and a quarter of the affirmation of openness in religious belief, to seeking the spirit in a diverse community.

And where are we now? Where are we going? What is up for the next chapter, the next 125 years? Well, first of all, more liberal religion!

When I returned from my two month sabbatical last year, I said that my vision for Neighborhood Church was to be a beloved community. This is an old phrase, one that has been used for UU churches for a long time. It was given moving expression by Martin Luther King Jr., who said that the beloved community is where reconciliation and redemption might occur.

A place where we can be reconcile with ourselves – with those parts of us that can grow and with those parts of us that seek support, with the soul and the spirit deep within; where we can be reconciled with the world, seeking justice and equity; where we can be reconciled with the earth, living sustainably and responsibly. And a place, too, where redemption can occur; where we might redeem our own lives, support those around us and work for the redemption of our community and our society, working to establish our highest ideals of compassion and justice and equity and peace.

The world needs us, Pasadena needs us, the San Gabriel valley needs, us, California needs us, the Unitarian Universalist Association needs us. Maybe you need us too.

This last Tuesday night, in the class Sara and I are leading on spiritual practice, we walked a labyrinth. Terri Hopper made one for us. We were about 15 or so, and in silence we walked the labyrinth, two or three at a time.

Labyrinths are ancient and occur all over the world, in various forms. They have different meanings and uses, one of which is to symbolize a spiritual journey, traveling from outside to inside, for the periphery to the center. I find it profound and provocative, especially when I give myself over to the experience. So Tuesday night we journeyed together, in silence, slowly and reverently.

We talked about the experience afterwards and, from among many wonderful statements, two seem right for today. One was about watching people walk the labyrinth and imagining looking down from above, seeing the patterns as people moved through the labyrinth. And I imagined this congregation from above, journeying together, all the many members over the 125 years, moving through their lives, getting close to the center, moving around and with each other.

It was a beautiful vision.

And the other comment was by one person who said that in walking she all of a sudden felt as if she were held by the heart of the church.

Held by the heart of the church. All these years, all the members of Neighborhood Church, since 1885, ministers, presidents, music leaders, religious education directors, teachers, adults, children – all of us together have created that heart that can hold each and every one of us. That's the beloved community.

Held by the heart of the church. We have done that; you have done that. We do that now; you do that now. Held by the heart of the church. Come into the circle of love, into the circle of justice and of caring. Come into the circle of a free faith, of a liberal faith. Come into this circle and be held by the heart of the church.

Happy 125 years to us all, and here's to the next 125!

I love you all

Amen