

"Liberalism and Liberation"
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Clarence Skinner, the great Universalist pacifist, writing at the end of World War II,
raised these concerns:

Insight comes to human beings,
whether primitive or modern,
whether naive or sophisticated.

Beneath all curious customs and beliefs,
deeper than ecclesiastical creeds,
more vital and basic than priestly rites,
stands out one impressive fact--
namely, humanity touches infinity.

Our home is in immensity.
We live, move and have our being in an eternity.
This magnificent assertion is our greatest affirmation.
Nothing else surpasses it in sweep of imagination
or depth of understanding.

It is a truth proclaimed
by all that we know of modern science.
It stands the test of experience as the enduring reality.

The insightful religion of the unities and the universals
is a radical cure.
It digs into the soil of humanity's selfishness,
superstitions and distortions.
It destroys the vicious partialisms which would lock us up
into the divisive cells of race, of gender, of class,
denying us our common rights of humanity.

This enemy--partialism--must be routed on every front--
economic, social, biological and cultural.

The only way to rout it
is to supplant the fears and errors of partialism
by a vigorous, realistic religion of universalism.
We must think, feel and act in universal terms,
and thus see how petty and sinful
are the partialisms of our lesser selves.

We must expand our spiritual powers
that we vastly increase the range
of our understanding and sympathy.

There is no other way.
It is greatness--universalism--or perish.

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Susan Molina wants to do the right thing.

She was born in this country to immigrant parents. Like thousands upon thousands of their compatriots, Susan's parents came north to this country seeking a better life for themselves and for their children. They were willing to take low paid jobs in Colorado but to guarantee their kids education and opportunity that they could not get in a rural Mexican economy that was in, shall we say, transformation.

Susan married young, too young, she says. She tolerated an abusive husband and did the best she could to raise her two babies. But when the abuse could be tolerated no longer, she moved home to share her mother's one bedroom apartment; she slept on the couch so her children could share a bed; she worked as a janitor on the one hand and as a free-lance domestic to people who needed a cleaning lady. She walked her kids to day care and then to kindergarten; they would pass street corners that were safer, and others that were less safe. Through it all, Susan Molina wanted to do the right thing.

Susan learned from a supervisor at work – at the janitor job, that is – that there was a position opening up in a condominium complex where she might become a building superintendent. Because she would be on-call for any emergencies, she would be expected to live in the super's apartment. Although the wages were still low, they reflected a raise for her and a chance for her to move out of her mother's home and for her children to have separate bedrooms (even if she would still sleep on the couch). Her mother would be near enough to provide support – and occasional grandmotherly baby-sitting – but her family would begin to experience some self-sufficiency and freedom.

Susan Molina knew she was doing the right thing. Until she learned about the consequences of being paid wages that brought her just above 200% of the federal poverty line. Her children would lose their state-supplied health insurance. Her family would lose their doctors. Her family's primary care physician would become the hospital emergency department.

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It was the end of World War II, and the Dean of the old Universalist seminary at Tufts University outside Boston was readying to retire. Clarence R. Skinner was rethinking the liberal religion that was the center of the program in theological learning that he had become responsible for. He had grown to understand that liberalism had its limits.

Rev. Skinner had made his mark in Universalism just before the First World War by chairing the denominational social justice commission. He was called to the ministry of Grace Universalist Church in Lowell, Massachusetts, where he introduced in the Sunday evening forum the pew response to what had been offered from the pulpit. He began agitating for a Universalist telling of the Social Gospel, and in 1914, Rev. Skinner – a man who never attended seminary – was invited to become Professor of Applied Christianity at Tufts.

Skinner and his wife moved to Boston, he began preparing young men for the Universalist ministers, and he published in 1915 “The Social Implications of Universalism,” expanding the guiding document adopted by the General Convention of the Universalist Church of America which spoke of religion not only as a salve for an individual’s heart but a call for the salvation of the whole of society. After the War, he would found the Community Church of Boston with his admired Unitarian colleague, Rev. John Haynes Holmes of the Community Church of New York, an experience of church based not in a distant abstract theology but in an imminent gathered community.

In the 1930s, Professor Skinner would become Dean of the Theological School, and in 1945 he would retire. He used his first year of retirement as a time to re-think Universalism, challenging Universalist ministers and congregations to become scientists and laboratories of new thought and action, encouraging a complexity of Universalisms where, for example, one congregation might center itself around human psychology, another around the arts, another around innovative liturgies, another around community service. He hoped that our congregations would stay in relationship with one another, share our learnings and successes, analyze our failures, push Universalism into a Religion for Greatness. Two paths face us, he proposed, Universalism, or perish.

Dean Skinner was experiencing the limits of liberal religion. How had liberalism faced the challenges, he asked, of the Great War? Had it embraced the social Gospel he had helped propose? How had the liberal Protestant churches which had their own Social Gospel movements responded to the threat of war? Even accepting that Christian would be fighting

Christian in Europe, as imperial powers sought to re-divide the world for the benefit of European nations, Skinner believed that the religious liberals in the United States could unite with one another, pursue the Social Gospel that affirmed our brother- and sisterhood, and seek peace, and – at least – could avoid taking sides in the Great War.

Instead, liberal churches throughout the United States put American flags into their sanctuaries, and recruiting tables in their lobbies. Liberal ministers called on young men, brave and bold, to enlist for the sake of their country. And as the gospel message of our kinship was lost in the din of the preparation for war, Skinner began to wonder – was there a future for liberal thought?

Skinner was disheartened, dispirited, dejected at the failure of liberalism. And he pondered liberalism's limits.

Does today's Universalism ask more of us?

For some people, theological liberalism is clearly sufficient. In faith stands, in customs and practices, in ethics and worldview, a religion that celebrates Freedom and Reason and Tolerance is clearly sufficient. Such a Liberal religion provides answers for life's questions and inspiration around life's mystery and community for the mediation of social and personal experience. Liberalism can contain much of our identity and aspiration.

But some of us ask more. Here's a simple example: I am a gay man – and I want more than Tolerance. I want to be more than just tolerated. I seek more than "don't ask, don't tell." I want to be respected and valued – and even celebrated.

Now clearly I'm conflating theological toleration – which we do practice, which I do celebrate – and the practice of simply "tolerating" some of us for who we really are different – differently inclined, differently colored, differently financially equipped, "tolerating" us and relegating us to the sidelines. But really, some gay men like me – and I bet more than a few lesbians, and bisexual persons, and even some asexual and heterosexual persons – want not to be tolerated, but welcomed, embraced, treasured. Some traditional gendered people and non-traditionally gendered people and transgendered people want to be included, cherished, challenged. A Liberal faith which doesn't include a vision for the transformation of our larger norms of behavior and thought is insufficient for many of us.

For some of us, a religion of liberation is necessary. For some of us, a radical religion is required whereby, in the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Rob Hardies of All Souls Church in Washington, DC, we need to know a Love, “That will not let us go, that will not let us down, that will not let us off.”

What this Love calls us to, I believe, is not merely good thoughts about the transformation of the world we experience with one another, I believe that Love calls us to be about the task of transformation of this universal human family, and that such transformation begins in the knowledge of one another, with the intention of the inclusion of one another, of the eventual embrace of one another.

A hard-working mother in Denver is thus not left to her own devices to provide health insurance for her children. Susan Molina was left neither to the individual hopeful practice of her religion in a search for grace, nor to the rich legacy of Catholic social teaching that forms her tradition. No. Molina was reached out to by the Metropolitan Organizing Project which was working through congregations in her community to address the development of leaders in her neighborhood to address the social concerns of her community. Susan Molina in her very traditional religion was brought into the practice of liberation.

I was pleased when, two years ago, Susan Molina and leading brothers and sisters from her Denver organization met with 400 others – including three ministers from Flint, Michigan, among them yours truly – to lobby congress, to work with secular allies to express a vision we have for the world. Her group worked in relationship with religious leaders from California – who are concerned about federal immigration policy – and Louisiana – who seek the restoration of people’s lives and neighborhoods – and New Jersey – where old industrial cities have been abandoned as economic globalization – another kind of universalism – has taken place.

We Michiganders, who in Flint are in the first years of co-creating a transformative, congregation-based community organization, Flint Area Congregations Together (FACT), we joined Susan Molina and 400 clergy and lay leaders representing 47 organizations in 150 cities, and over a million families of faith. Together, we spoke truth to power. Together, we called for liberation of people from suffering – liberation of people living near the poverty line, from the fear that their children would be lost for the lack of simple preventive health procedures; and the liberation of members of Congress who need to know and develop the liberative mindset

that says there is enough to go around; that there are powerful choices that powerful people can make; and that our faith in each other and in democracy is not misdirected.

This liberal faith reaches its limits when you and I imagine that this faith we practice and this faith we cherish is about ourselves. Yes, our liberal faith—our faith in freedom, our faith in reason, and faith in acceptance beyond toleration—is a powerful witness to the possibilities of the human spirit; it may speak to us, and give us a place where each of us, and all of us, may find meaning and value, wisdom and forgiveness, acceptance and self-acceptance. But for our liberal faith to live into liberation, it must exceed the limits of this community and this sacred congregation of souls.

This is not a question of liberal politics or conservative politics, of Republican or Democrat, of left or right tendencies, but a question of the radical notions of one human family, one human community, seeking the transformation of the world as it is into the world that it might yet be. And liberals and conservatives and radicals and moderates and all of us are invited to do this work together. To go beyond our limits. To be transforming. To be transformed.

We are called, with one another, to engage the greater world, to pledge ourselves to an extension of the Love we have found here into the larger world.

The Love that motivated Clarence Skinner was like the Love that transformed a conservative Salvadoran bishop into a witness for liberation. Oscar Romero, who, even after his ascension to power was still called by his people “Monsignor,” urged an appreciation of a violence of Love which could counter the violence of this world. He saw that Love compelled people of faith to the task of liberation: to the spiritual task of consciousness raising, to the spiritual task of solidarity with the poorest of the poor, to the spiritual task of destroying the social structures that were obstacles to rule and realm of God in the real lives of people, to the spiritual task of mutuality and sacrifice. That love that will not let us go, will not let us down, will not let us off powers us, and directs us, and judges us.

Two years after the legislation to renew the State Children’s Health Insurance Program was passed by Congress, two years after it was vetoed by a president, Susan Molina’s organization was present in solidarity when new legislation was passed and signed into law by President Barack Obama. Her participation in her congregation-based community organization

led to a level of liberation from fear as her children were again insured, could again have some access to our health care system. Susan Molina from Colorado and my neighbors and friends from Flint were able to catch a glimpse of what Love wrought in our lives.

The radical religion of Skinner, the liberating religion of Romero, the religion of this very community call us to greatness. We are called to use the intuition we treasure—the intuition that there is something in the aspiration of all human religion that is true; the intuition that the oneness of life calls us to realize a oneness in the human family; the intuition that the covenants we—you and I—are able successfully to make with one another contain the germ, the promise, that we may one day be able to walk in covenant with all humans, with all sentient beings, with the Universe Herself.

And we who live amidst the poverty of body, mind and spirit in this city, in this state, in this country at this moment of economic challenge which is a moment of spiritual challenge, we who experience oppressions of many sorts in our wild and precious lives; and we who have enjoyed a measure of freedom in our life together, we Unitarian Universalists, liberals and liberationists, we are called to become agents of abundance and liberation and the fulfillment of all our potential.

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