



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

What Do You Know to Be True Because It Happened to You? Spiritualism, Spookiness, & Universalism

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Halloween is a little less than a week away: 'tis the season for all things spooky and scary. Most of the time, I don't watch a lot of horror movies. If I want to be scared, I can just pick up a newspaper! The headlines of current events are usually quite scary enough, thank you very much.

But, as is the case for many other people, Magin and I make an exception each October. As Halloween approaches, we are usually in the mood to watch at least a few scary films or TV shows. We tend to avoid anything too gory, preferring instead tales of the supernatural: ghosts, hauntings, and things that go bump in the night. So with Halloween approaching, it seems like an auspicious time to pay a visit to an often ignored corner of our own tradition of Unitarian Universalism: a spooky season in which UU history intersected strongly with the spiritualist movement.

Spiritualism is a religious movement based on the belief that we the living can communicate with the spirits of people who have died. Think: séances, mediums, and ouija boards. (Buescher vii). At its height in the nineteenth century (in the decade before the Civil War), approximately 1.5 million Americans practiced Spiritualism (xi). And although people from many different backgrounds became Spiritualists, **our Universalist forebears were “disproportionately drawn to this belief, and no denomination lost more of its leaders to it”** (viii).

That's interesting, and it's a part of our UU history that isn't talked about that often. But once you stop to think about it, it's not that surprising. The whole

Universalist half of our heritage started with people being deeply concerned with the question of *what happens to you after you die* (128). And our Universalist forebears were called *universalists* precisely because they rejected the idea of hell and preached *universal* salvation for all. They proclaimed that any God worthy of the name would not punish people *eternally* in the afterlife for what were at most finite transgressions in this life.

Over time, as many of you have heard me say before, the universalist impulse became less about rejecting hell in a “next world,” and much more about “loving the hell out of *this world*.” And that’s the part of universalism most widely honored in our UU movement today. That growing universalist impulse to “love the hell out of this world” continued to grow and evolve, leading many of our forebears to become:

- abolitionists in the nineteenth century in support of *universal freedom* from slavery,
- suffragists in the twentieth century in support of *universal voting rights*,
- equal rights activists in the early twenty-first century in support of a more universally inclusive definition of marriage for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender citizens.

That same spirit of universalism continues to inspire many religious progressives today to organize for programs such as *universal* health care, *universal* access to college or vocational training, and a *universal* basic income.

Universalism is fundamentally a belief that every person matters. In the words of our UU First Principle, each of us has “inherent worth and dignity.” And universalism calls us to shape our acts, our societies and our planet in ever-widening circles of compassion in which everyone increasingly is included.

Clearly there remains much work to be done to fulfill the full promise of the Universalist half of our heritage. But what about that original Universalist interest in what happens after you die? How might we best respond to that question today? Well, the truth is that even as universalism was evolving in the nineteenth century to have a more *this-worldly* focus on “loving the hell out of this world,” it was also continuing to have an *other-worldly* focus on the possibility of communication between the living and the dead. Let me give you an example—a UU ghost story, if you will.

More than two centuries ago in 1809, the thirteen-year-old Johannes Bonfils (who lived with his uncle) went to visit his mother. His walk back home took him

through a forest, where he unexpectedly encountered his father, who had died two years earlier. According to his reports, he both *saw* his father and *heard* him speak. When he told his family, however, they made fun of him and dismissed his experience as a hallucination.

Nevertheless, the next week on his way home from visiting his mother, he again encountered his father, who had another message for him. This time, he did not tell his family. (That's often what happens with such experiences: people keep such stories mostly to themselves from fear of being made fun of or not being believed.)

For a while, he thought these two early encounters from beyond the grave might have been anomalies, but almost fifteen years later—not long after he was ordained as a minister in the Congregational Church—he had another experience of being visited several times by another relative who had died. This time, his wife told him she saw and heard the apparition as well. Although he did not share about these experiences with many people, they did cause him to reject the traditional Christian teachings about hell, which led him to convert to Universalism (5).

This story is one among many examples of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears encountering spirits, attending séances, and much more. If you are curious to dive into the details, the best starting point is a book titled [The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience](#) by John Buescher (Skinner House Books, 2004). But for now, I want to invite us to zoom out a bit to consider how such ghost stories relate more broadly to our Unitarian Universalist movement both then and now.

The point I would underscore most strongly is the relationship of spiritualism to what is known as the “Liberal Turn in Religion,” which started in the late 1700s and strongly influenced both the Unitarian and Universalist sides of our heritage. Importantly, the liberal turn in religion is not a turn toward the Democratic Party. Rather, it refers to the Latin root *liber*, which means “free,” as in the word liberty.

The Liberal Turn in religion refers to a shift in the locus where people looked for religious authority. It would be difficult to overemphasize how important this paradigm shift was and continues to be both in Unitarian Universalism and any other progressive religious movement. The Liberal Turn in religion means the turning away from believing

or doing something because of the influence of a *hierarchy* (because it's what a religious authority said)—or *tradition itself* (belief in what has allegedly always been believed or in that purportedly happened a long time ago). Instead, theological liberalism emphasizes *reason* (what is logical) and *experience* (what one believes to be true (because of one's own interpretation of a particular firsthand experience)). Notice how this shift relocates authority from *outside* the individual (what "they" tell me to believe) to *inside* the individual (what makes sense to me). This shift to personal authority can make all the difference in the world, and this dynamic continues to play out today in many religious debates such as over women's ordination or LGBTQ+ rights.

The larger point is that the same theologically liberal emphasis on reason and firsthand experience that freed our Unitarian forebears from feeling they had to believe in the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus—and which also freed our Universalist forebears from feeling they had to believe in hell—also opened up freedom to explore experiences of apparitions or of a medium claiming to channel the voice of a lost loved one (x).

Now, some of you might be thinking: that's nothing new. And you are right that there are plenty of stories in religious traditions going back thousands of years about angels, demons, spirits, exorcisms, and more. But the liberal turn in religion means that all those spooky, weird, and strange experiences that used to be explained exclusively by religious authority figures and interpreted only through the lens of traditional theology were now open to both scientific and supernatural interpretations by individuals.

When you let go of hierarchy and tradition, you are left with a lot of individual freedom (108). Don't get me wrong: ultimately I think the tradeoff is more than worth it. But we should also be honest that, although sometimes that liberty can genuinely set you free from harmful limitations, at other times, what at first feels like liberation can end up casting you adrift and leaving you vulnerable to the manipulations of charlatans, frauds, and sellers of snake oil.

So what are we to make of all this? For the skeptics in the audience, be assured that many of our Universalist forebears who were part of the Spiritualist movement

were very much aware that there was no way to prove with certainty how many of their experiences were subjective or psychological—and truly, many of them wrestled with that dilemma (6). At the same time, many of our forebears understood themselves to be approaching their Spiritualist explanations as scientifically as possible. (54). They really were interested in collecting what they understood to be proof about whether the living really could speak with the dead. But here's the rub: science is best equipped to deal with phenomena that are easily replicable in laboratory conditions. Spiritualist experiences, however, are often uncanny, strange, and weird. Many people stumble into them unexpectedly, often in connection with traumatic deaths or accidents which are impossible to replicate.

In terms of the Six Sources that make up the “big tent” of our UU living tradition, we could frame this situation as a tension between our First Source (“Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder”) and our Fifth Source (“Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit”). Both of these sources are central to our UU tradition.

For some people, our First Source is enough at least for them personally: the sufficient evidence is their firsthand experience. They may be unable to prove their interpretation of that experience definitively to others in a double-blind scientific study, even when that experience of something strange, uncanny, or weird remains one of the most important and influential of their life.

Along those lines, I'll let you in on an open secret. One interesting thing about being a minister is that congregants tend to share such stories with you from time to time, prompted by various circumstances: stories about experiences they might have shared before only with a few close friends or family members. The specifics of those stories are not mine to share, but I can attest that a larger percentage of people than is often talked about publicly have had one or more spooky, weird, uncanny experiences. There are plenty of UU ghost stories and similar experiences, both then and now.

Along these lines, in a few moment, we're going to be invited to sing together Hymn 1001, titled “Breaths.” The lyrics are based on a poem by the Senegalese poet

and storyteller Birago Diop (1906 – 1989) who incidentally was also a skilled veterinary surgeon. Diop often wove themes from African folktales into his work.

Forty years ago, in 1980, the American singer and composer Ysaÿe Barnwell (1946-) set Diop's poetry to music to form the song "Breaths," later made famous by the African American *a cappella* ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock of which Barnwell is a part. Barnwell is also a Unitarian Universalist, who founded the Jubilee Singers, a choir at All Souls Church Unitarian in Washington DC.

When I first heard this song "Breaths" many years ago, I found its opening lines confusing: "Listen more often to things than to beings." At that time, I thought, "Shouldn't we do the opposite?" Shouldn't we listen to *alive beings*? But over the years as I've come to more fully understand the UU Seventh Principle of "The interdependent web of all existence," I've come to see that she—and the poet Birago Diop and others—were on to something. *Listen more often to things than to beings.*

The poetry and lyrics of the song continue, inviting us to consider that if we pause to listen deeply—with an open mind and an open heart—we might feel the presence of our ancestors all around us: in the crackling of a fire, in the gurgling of a stream, in the rustling of the wind. *Listen more often to things than to beings.* As to how much of that is psychology and how much is spirituality is a question that ultimately each of us must answer for ourselves.

Ultimately, as our UU Seventh Principle reminds us, we are part of an interdependent web. We are not separate and isolated, and the boundaries between our senses of "self" and the larger world are much more porous than is sometimes granted. And as many world religions hold, spiritual boundaries are often experienced by many as being particularly porous in this autumnal season of the year, when our part of the world is tilting from fall to winter. In that spirit, let us hold in our hearts what we have experienced firsthand for ourselves **as we sing together *Breaths*.**