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Arlington Steet Church
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The Holy in Disguise

The first moments of Universalism on American soil are a great story. Two hundred and forty-five years ago this week, events unfolded that psychiatrist Carl Jung would call a “synchronicity” – a meaningful event that did not seem to follow the laws of cause and effect – and others of us would call a miracle.

In the mid-1700s, in Good Luck, New Jersey, there lived a pious, illiterate farmer named Thomas Potter. His background was Quaker and Baptist, but, listening as scripture was read to him, he began to reject the Calvinist belief in predestination, and to believe that everyone would ultimately attain salvation. Word of a radical new theology, called Universalism, probably reached him from missionaries visiting from Pennsylvania. He recruited people with similar leanings into his home, to discuss the possibilities of living this new belief.

In 1760, long before the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams* told the story of an Iowa farmer who hears a mysterious voice in his cornfield saying, “If you build it, he will come” – and, despite taunts of lunacy, builds a baseball diamond on his land, onto which the ghosts of great players, led by Shoeless Joe Jackson, emerge from the corn – 229 years earlier, Thomas Potter built a meeting house out of a real life Field of Dreams, for the express purpose of welcoming a preacher of the Universalist gospel. For ten years, in the face of his neighbors’ increasing skepticism, he waited for that mythical preacher to appear.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, a fervent young man, renowned for his preaching, found himself in a full-blown life crisis. John Murray was serving a Methodist congregation in London when he heard of Universalism and began to study it, and to believe that what he was hearing and reading was true. It cost him his pulpit. Soon afterwards, his beloved wife and infant son sickened and died, and, utterly despondent, he

narrowly avoided debtor's prison. John Murray determined to give up on religion all together, and to make a new life in America.

He booked passage on the good ship "Hand in Hand," bound for New York. Diverted to Philadelphia, they were on their way up the Jersey coast when they ran into fog, and were swept into a bay and onto a sandbar. Going ashore seeking provisions – you know what's going to happen – John Murray was directed to the Potter home.

The apocryphal tale, as told by John Murray, says that Thomas Potter witnessed the ship's stranding, and greeted him, saying, "I have longed to see you. I have been expecting you a long time!" Thomas Potter believed, he said, that this was the preacher for whom he had been waiting, sent to him by providence.

John Murray protested that preaching was in his past, that he wanted nothing more to do with it, and that he intended to leave as soon as the wind and the tide shifted. Thomas Potter responded, "The wind will never change, sir, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting house, a message from G*d."

They struck an agreement that, if the boat were still stuck in the bay the following Sunday, Murray would preach. If it were freed, he would be gone.

On September 30th, 1770, the ship was still fast in the sand, and John Murray preached to Thomas Potter and his family and neighbors. His topic was Universal Salvation, and he told of a G*d of Love without exceptions. As soon as he finished his sermon, a sailor ran in, saying the wind had turned; John Murray departed for New York that afternoon. But he soon returned to Good Luck and his faithful new friend, preaching to enthusiastic congregations in both Thomas Potter's meeting house and in nearby towns and villages for several years, until he made his way to New England, to Gloucester, where he established the first official Universalist church, and, in 1793, was instrumental in founding the Universalist denomination.¹

¹ 10,000 thanks for all the research done by the good folks at Murray Grove Retreat and Renewal Center in Lanoka Harbor, New Jersey! The Potter-Murray story as they tell it may be found here: murraygrove.org/#!/pottermurray/cljzf and here: murraygrove.org/#!/thomas-potter/cizo and here: murraygrove.org/#!/john-murray/clf9

Over almost two and a half centuries, now, accelerated by its merger with Unitarianism in 1961, that universal love that John Murray preached has continued to evolve: from personal salvation to social salvation; from being saved by love for an afterlife to being saved by love for right here, right now; from love of one another to a love that embraces the whole planet. Universalism, as we are now called to live it, is faith without dogma; hope through action; and love with no exceptions.²

I love this story of faith and faithfulness, embodied in the likes of an unlettered farmer and a dispirited preacher. And I love that it reminds us that the holy may well be in disguise. French novelist Marcel Proust wrote, “The real voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” Seek, and ye shall find.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta said she viewed the sickest and most destitute people in the world as Jesus in all his distressing disguises. She founded her ministry on Jesus’ teaching, “For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me; naked, and you clothed me; sick, and you cared for me; in prison, and you visited me.... Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ... ye have done it unto me.”³

When Mother Teresa looked into the eyes of those she literally pulled out of the gutter, she saw Jesus. When she held a dying child in her arms, she believed that she was actually cradling Jesus. “They are Jesus,” she said. “Everyone is Jesus in a distressing disguise.”⁴ The Little Prince’s fox said, “One can see rightly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye.” We are invited to look with the eyes of the heart to see the holy in disguise.

This past week, during the Days of Awe, I read a beautiful story of two congregations – one Jewish and one Lutheran – that met together over the course of several years, sharing meals, stories, and educational opportunities. Their mutual desire was simply to know one another better, and to understand one another as people of faith.

² Love With No Exceptions: Faith Hope Love ~ 250 Years of Universalism (1770-2020)

³ Matthew 25:35-40

⁴ for more: suffering.net/servmo-t.htm

One night, the rabbi was awakened by a phone call: the temple was on fire. He rushed to rescue the Torah from the flames; the building was lost. His first thoughts were of Yom Kippur, the holiest of the high holy days: where would his congregation observe it? As soon as the Lutheran pastor heard about the fire, he and his people offered their church to them for as long as they would need it. The rabbi speaks of literally standing amid the ashes, streaming with gratitude, and marveling at the power of friendship and love, awestruck by the holy in disguise.

Several days later, members of the synagogue went with the rabbi to prepare the Lutheran sanctuary for the Day of Atonement. As they entered the sanctuary, they stopped, in shock. Several of them began to weep. The large cross that was the focal point of the room, and of the Lutheran faith, had been removed.

“We never imagined you would do this,” the rabbi said to the pastor. “We would never have asked.”

“The pastor responded, ‘My congregation and I have learned from you that our beloved cross has been used by some as a sign to persecute your people. We asked ourselves whether our identity as Christians required us to keep it up while we share this sacred space with you. We chose to take it down. We know who we are, and we treasure the spiritual path we all share.’”⁵

Beloved spiritual companions,
 synchronicity, miracles, or good luck may well be our fortune;
 let’s throw our weight to making it so.
 Perhaps we will build something and wait a faithful ten years for it.
 Perhaps we will see it every day, in the eyes of every person.
 Let us look with new eyes, and seek, and find.
 Even in the face of utter destruction,
 let us tell good stories of the faith that is still evolving among us –
 faith without dogma; hope through action; and love with no exceptions –
 stories of the holy in disguise,
 and treasure our shared spiritual path:
 love, service, justice, peace.

⁵ as told by Robert V. Taylor, *A New Way to Be Human*, p. 39