

Each, Every, and All: Universalism and the Green New Deal
Keynote Address with Q&A by Rev. Dr. Adam Robersmith
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Thank you for the invitation to come speak today! I was honored by Terry's request. As he and I talked about what I might bring to you, I found myself drawing together many of the threads that I've been working with over my years of ministry. As a graduate student, I've studied our Universalist heritage and how it permeates our current UU culture, theology, and ethics. At our 2017 General Assembly in New Orleans, I was one of the five ministers who spoke at the Berry Street lecture, speaking about how my multiple identities and roles intersect with one another...and our movement...and offered some thoughts about what a more inclusive way of imagining ourselves as UUs might look like. In the last year, my chapter "Cherishing Our World: Avoiding Despair in Environmental Justice Work" was included in Justice on Earth, looking at Universalist theology as a grounding for spiritual strength in this important and difficult task. Since writing those, I've come to serve the Universalist Church of West Hartford, Connecticut—a 198-year-old Universalist heritage UU congregation that takes its history and theology seriously. So this opportunity to speak with you has been a blessing, because it's been an opportunity to hold and develop these ideas in a new direction that is even more interconnected, inclusive, Universalist.

The Universalism that we might call classical Universalism — the Universalism of John Murray and Hosea Ballou, the Universalism of the late 1700s and 1800s — derived its name and theology from its perspective on the afterlife, the end of time. It spoke of an ultimately and eternally loving God and universal salvation: the idea that God was so profoundly loving that all people would ultimately be saved, that all things would be restored to God at the end of time. It is a powerful, inspiring theology, developed in resistance to the idea of a punishing, vengeful God; it encouraged good in people in this life, and yet was grounded in what would come after death.

The Universalism of the 20th Century — of Clarence Skinner and the Charles Street Meeting House — shifted to the idea of Universal Religion. This Universalism said that there was something valuable in all religions, and that it was the job of 20th C Universalism to determine what the universals of all those religions are and embody that. It is a Universalism that asks us to see value in all human meaning-making, and yet often looks for commonality that affirms what it already values.

Today's Universalism? We don't entirely know what that is yet. We're still waiting to see what it becomes. Our justice work gives us some indication, though: Side With Love and its heart symbol proclaims our theological and practical reasons for our LGBTQ, gender, disability, and racial equity work, immigration work in the world. Our imperfect, but ongoing, work to become ever more inclusive and hospitable within our congregations comes directly from the idea that Universalism is not just a nice idea, but a radical way to see the sacredness of the whole world and to live that, to make it real, together.

As a Universalist, here's what I envision: a networked, ecological Universalism that holds each, every, and all in its relationships. Each one, of every kind, and all things. Each individual, of every form of being—animal, plant, stone, human, fungus, star, and so on—and including all things. A Universalism that is not only about such profound love that it generates universal salvation in the afterlife, but is also about an all-inclusive love that generates universal equity, sustainability, and common good in this life. A Universalism that is not about distilling religions to find a single truth, but rather one that celebrates the value and richness and world-saving possibilities that all our varied ways of making meaning can offer. It collaborates to discover and create what is best for the whole.

In this sort of Universalism, we take each, every, and all into account. All people. All social structures: religion, economics, science. The earth and all its beings and systems and elements...and that which is beyond the earth as well. It is a Universalism that, like classical Universalism, is about not just this moment, but every moment during and after our lives: it is inclusive of what happens now, but also of what happens after we are gone, and our descendants, and the descendants of today's animals, and plants, and ecologies are the ones who continue.

This Universalism — one that engages the Universalism of our heritage, our living tradition, but then becomes a Universalism for now and the future — is the one that I would ask you to consider to meet the issues and concerns and needs of our time. The needs of our time have new wrinkles and twists and realities that the Universalisms of old are not fully prepared to address. We face dramatic economic disparity, both legal and illegal abuses of workers and the poor, the undermining of unions, and a diminishing middle class. These remind us of disparities and injustices of both the distant and the recent past. It's upsettingly familiar. Woven into that, we also face climate change that is clearly underway...and by all scientific accounts, the worst is yet to come without radical transformation of human economics, industry, energy, agriculture, transportation, waste management...how we live and what we prioritize as our highest values.

The Green New Deal — an idea with many policies yet to be fleshed out and argued over — is an economic reimagining of our nation that holds both human good and earthly, ecological good to be mutually possible and deeply necessary. The Green New Deal offers a place of conjunction, of common synergistic effort. It says that what is good for people should and must be good for the planet; what is good for the planet should and must be good for people. It declares that our means of production and supply, our means of consuming and sustaining, must take seriously the needs of all humanity — not just the enrichment of a few — and also must take just as seriously the sustainability and flourishing of all the beings and systems of our earth.

This is a Universalist sort of public policy: we need economic justice, but not at the expense of the health of our world; we need to exist sustainably, but not so that only a few will benefit most. And, should it miss the mark in terms of economic sustainability and justice or environmental sustainability and justice, then it must be reimagined so that it can more successfully create what is best for each, every, and all.

Too often, our public debates want to choose what one thing must receive all our focus, while the rest goes by the wayside. This kind of oppositional, binary thinking says that either we can be good to the earth or we can be good to people. Either we must have the ability for a few to

become outrageously wealthy, or none of us will be able to live well. These are false choices. *Resist them!* Creating new systems of green energy will create new jobs. Reducing carbon emissions — and finding ways to decrease atmospheric carbon dioxide — will save us the economic losses that come from diminished agriculture, greater illness, climate disasters, and the movement and care of climate refugees.

Too much of our public discourse either ignores the realities of our environmental and economic challenges or makes them so large as to be inconceivable. Our reactions to this discourse often become unhelpful in terms of finding solutions. Some of us are panicking. Some are refusing to listen. Some are trying to scare everyone into certain behaviors (whether to reverse or ignore climate change) and others are just repeating what they think is true. With all this debate and reaction, problems as large as these can cause ineffectiveness, incapability, and despair. *Resist these narratives!* Scaring people with doomsday scenarios—even if they are based on our very best knowledge—is not sufficient to create positive and necessary change. In fact, it often creates resistance or incapacitation.

Making pollution and waste, over-consumption and sheer greed, sinful or shameful has some effect, but not yet enough to change how we behave as a culture. In the meantime, people around the world suffer with economic policies and environmental changes they are unable to reverse or accommodate, and those with the least power and resources suffer most of all. In *Justice on Earth*, I remind us that our Universalist ancestors faced a similar dilemma in the 1800s. At the time, much of Christian preaching and theology was focused on Hell: the burning fires of Hell and the eternal torment that all would suffer if they did not fall in line with a particular set of moral ideals.

Many communities of faith relied upon fear to cause righteous behavior, but fear of hellfire and damnation was insufficient to eliminate undesirable behavior. If it had, sin and vice would have vanished from the American experience. It did not. It has not. Hosea Ballou, who gave us some of our most basic theology and ethics, writes:

...The preaching of future rewards and punishments, for the purpose of inducing people to love God and moral virtue, is not only useless, but pernicious. All such preaching, be it ever so well intended, not only amounts to a declaration that God and moral virtue are, in themselves, unlovely and unworthy of being loved, but, as far as it is believed, serves to alienate the affections from these most precious objects.

We may illustrate this subject by the use of figures furnished in the Scriptures. There God is represented by a fountain of living waters. Divine truth, by waters, wine and milk, by bread, etc. Should we be offered an immense reward for accepting [this nourishment], and should we be threatened with severe punishments if we refused them, it would be natural to suppose that the person who should make such proposals...did not believe these things to be of any value in themselves.

So...what if we believed that all the good and sacred things that we have available to us (waters, wine and milk and bread and every other good food, breathable air, fertile land, stable climate)

and the good and sacred things that we can envision as possible (true social equity for all people, economic systems that prevent hoarding wealth by the few at the expense of everyone else, affordable and sustainable education, medicine, and transportation) were inextricably intertwined, inseparable. What if we would share that our theology doesn't now and never did require winners and losers, the saved and the damned?

In matters of faith, we often act as if developing our framework of values and meaning is terribly complicated. It's not. It's not necessarily easy, but it is simple: *See everything as sacred. Love is always the answer.* In public policy, we often act as if we can't hold multiple truths and aims together to strive for something truly good for each, every, and all. We can — that is what living in covenant, rather than creed teaches us.

Resist the lies of hell and damnation in any form. Bring forward your Universalism...our Universalism. Understand it to be a kind of all-inclusive earthly salvation: nothing and no-one left out, creature, plant, ecosystem, earth, human, as well as knowing that humans are part of the solution, rather than an evil to be tolerated. Allow our heritage to inspire you to create change and community—to support a Green New Deal and a whole life that is spiritually, economically, environmentally, lovingly sustainable and just.