

# Values in Our History

## Freedom of Thought

**“Life becomes religious whenever we make it so.”** —Sophia Lyons Fahs

## Personal Experience

Unitarian Universalism names direct experience as an important Source of religious and spiritual understanding, an idea that originated with nineteenth-century Transcendentalism. The 1933 Humanist Manifesto, signed by several Unitarians and one Universalist, stated, “Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious....” Religious education curricula of the mid-twentieth century integrated humanism into both Unitarianism and Universalism, asking children to reflect on such everyday experiences as finding a dead animal or the birth of a sibling. At the urgent request of parents and religious educators, the UUA ventured into comprehensive sexuality education in 1970 with the publication of *About Your Sexuality*. Today’s *Our Whole Lives* sexuality education curricula build on the idea that sexuality is an important and sacred part of being human, offer accurate information, and guide participants to make their religious and moral values central to their understanding of themselves as sexual beings and their relationships with others.

Unitarian Universalists explore the religious meaning of the experiences of their lives through sharing of personal stories and reflection, often in small groups. We mark important human milestones through rites of passage: baby dedication, coming of age, bridging into young adulthood, weddings and commitment ceremonies, and memorial services.

## Many Sources

Transcendentalists embraced ideas from Hinduism, but it was the Western Unitarian Conference, led by Jenkin Lloyd Jones, that fully embraced wisdom from the world’s religious and philosophical texts. In 1897, the conference declared, “We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new.” Jones went on to work with others, including Fannie Barrier Williams, to organize the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, which included representatives from Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Jainism. In the 1950s, Universalist Kenneth Patton, minister at the experimental Charles Street Meeting House in Boston, drew on texts from many religious traditions, preaching that there are common threads of meaning that unite all. Patton’s words and ideas appear throughout *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook.

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**Fannie Barrier Williams** (1855-1944), a Black Unitarian educator and activist, was a key organizer of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions. She delivered an address to that body, “Religious Duty to the Negro,” in which she called for “More religion and less church . . . Less theology and more of human brotherhood.”

**Sophia Lyon Fahs** (1876-1978) was a curriculum director at the American Unitarian Association (1937-1951), overseeing the publication of the New Beacon Series.

**Jenkin Lloyd Jones** (1843-1918) was a minister, educator, missionary, and longtime secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference.

**Ken Patton’s sanctuary:** The Charles Street Meeting House in Boston, led by Rev. Kenneth Patton from 1949 until 1964, was an experimental Universalist congregation. The sanctuary featured a painting of the Andromeda Nebula and books from many of the world’s spiritual and religious traditions.

## Beloved Community

**“The universe sings no less because time and space wear us thin. The music calls us to recognize our limitations, to recognize that the song is best sung with others.”** —Manish Mishra-Marzetti

### Roots

The UU commitment to building Beloved Community has roots on both the Unitarian and Universalist sides of our tradition. Beginning with the 1648 Cambridge Platform signed by English settlers in Dedham, Massachusetts, our self-governing congregations have gathered in the spirit of mutual love. In the late nineteenth century, Universalism’s core message that all are saved through God’s love had expanded to embrace the idea that the kingdom of Heaven is reflected in love for one another. Both Universalists and Unitarians were involved in the Social Gospel movement, in which Christianity is practiced by serving those on the margins of society. Today’s UUs build community within congregations and also work for the liberation of all people.

### Welcoming Congregation and Marriage Equality

After two decades of work from UU leaders and UUA staff, the 1989 General Assembly passed an historic Welcoming Congregation resolution, and congregations began the education, reflection, and action work necessary to fully affirm and include lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and to advocate for equality in the public square. Unitarian Universalists became strong supporters of marriage equality; the first legal same-gender wedding in the country was performed at the UUA chapel in 2004 by then-president William Sinkford. In recent years, commitment to safety, justice, affirmation and inclusion for transgender and genderqueer people, both within congregations and in society, have led to increasing congregational education and action.

### Racial Justice

When Dr. Martin Luther King called upon people of faith in March 1965 to march for civil rights in Selma, Alabama, many Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay people responded. Two among them were murdered by white supremacists: Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo. A few years later, conflict arose over control of funds allocated by the UU General Assembly for Black communities, with many white UUs unwilling to cede decision-making authority about how UUs could support Black communities to Black UUs. Damage from the conflict lasted for decades. Responding faithfully to a call from Unitarian Universalist people of color, Unitarian Universalists are working to lift up and center the voices and perspectives of those who have been historically marginalized. The work continues today, with UUs supporting human rights for documented and undocumented immigrants and refugees, reform of the criminal justice system, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

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**1999 UU World Cover:** The Welcoming Denomination Faces Down Homophobia

**Unitarian Universalists** march for immigrant rights in San Diego in 2010.

**Frances Ellen Watkins Harper** (1825-1911), a child of free African American parents, was a well-loved poet and a strong advocate for abolition of slavery and for women’s rights. She was a member of both Unitarian and African Methodist Episcopal congregations.

## Interdependent Web

**“Old life recomposes into new life, and we are not separate from this grand, inclusive, regenerative scheme.”**

—Jaco Ten Hove

### Connection with the Natural World

From the beginning, Unitarians and Universalists in America saw in the natural world a place to commune with God. By the late nineteenth century, our faiths fully embraced wonder and gratitude for the natural world and drew lessons from the world of nature. By the time the Unitarians and Universalists consolidated to form the UUA in 1961, a generation of leaders had grown up using children’s curricula that celebrated the natural world, exploring earthworms, stars, birds, rocks, and the human hand.

UUs have sought to protect the natural world as well as celebrate it. In 1843, Margaret Fuller questioned the Western cultural notion that the natural world was to be used as humans saw fit. Beginning in April 1970 with the first Earth Day, UUs have been part of broader efforts to lift up environmental issues through worship, witness, and service. The Green Sanctuary program, begun in 2001, invites congregations to actively commit to protecting the environment. Today’s Unitarian Universalists affirm the interdependence of all life on earth and embrace the environmental justice movement, which calls us to attend to the well-being of those who are most impacted by the effects of global warming.

### Science and Religion

Joseph Priestley, who discovered oxygen, was both scientist and Unitarian clergyman, and the two were not seen as incompatible. It was after Charles Darwin, a Unitarian, published *On the Origin of Species* that many perceived science and religion to be at odds. Traditional Christians, including some Unitarians and Universalists, were initially dismayed by the theory of evolution. It didn’t take long for our theological forebears to fully embrace Darwin’s theory, and along with it, the use of reason and the scientific method in examining religious truths. Twentieth-century Unitarians and Universalists began to explicitly view scientific discoveries as religious “texts.” Our 1985 by-laws name six Sources, including “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science.” Most Unitarian Universalists today consider scientific discoveries an important tool in their search for truth and meaning.

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**Margaret Fuller** (1810-1850) was a renowned feminist writer, teacher, and scholar. She travelled to the Great Lakes region. *Summer on the Lakes*, 1843, is her account of her travels and her interactions with both white settlers and indigenous people.

**Charles Darwin** (1809-1882) was a naturalist and geologist who published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, proposing the theory of evolution.

**Cecelia Payne-Gaposchkin** (1900-1979) discovered that hydrogen was the most abundant element in the universe and that stars were composed mostly of hydrogen and helium. A brilliant astronomer, she also taught Sunday School at her local Unitarian church.

**Joseph Priestley** (1733-1804) was a Unitarian clergyman, a chemist, and a philosopher who discovered oxygen in 1744 in England. After his church, home, and lab were burned by a mob, he came to the United States, where his Unitarian theology took root.

**Gail Forsyth-Vail**, a credentialed religious educator, master level, is the author or developmental editor of several UU history curricula and resources. Before retiring, she served as the interim director of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Lifespan Faith Engagement Office.

## For further exploration

### Web pages

- Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography: [uudb.org](http://uudb.org)
- Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society: [uuhhs.org](http://uuhhs.org)
- Faith Like a River: Themes in Unitarian Universalist History: [uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river](http://uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river)
- Resistance and Transformation: A Unitarian Universalist Social Justice History: [uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/resistance](http://uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/resistance)
- Journal of Unitarian Universalist History: [uuhhs.org/journal-of-uu-history](http://uuhhs.org/journal-of-uu-history)

### Print resources

- Polly Peterson, *Stirring the Nation's Heart: Eighteen Stories of Prophetic Unitarians and Universalists of the Nineteenth Century* (UUA)
- Gail Forsyth-Vail and Polly Peterson, *Missionaries, Builders, and Pathfinders: Unitarian Universalist Stories from the Midwest, West, and South, 1830-1930* (UUA)
- Mark Morrison-Reed, *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism* (Skinner House)

These books, as well as packs of 25 copies of this pamphlet, can be purchased at InSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop at [uua.org/bookstore](http://uua.org/bookstore)