"What's in a Name"?

Rob Eller-Isaacs
Unity Church
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We are somebody. We have a history, a framework, which allows and under girds our freedom. Born of the Renaissance, our faith first took form on the left wing of the Reformation. In a very real sense it sailed out from Leiden on the Mayflower as those we have come to call the Pilgrims set off on their errand into the wilderness. Then, the same discontent which drove them from their homes in England, that deep desire to live a true and faithful life, found new expression as Transcendentalism renewed the longing to know God unencumbered by constraints of creed or social code. We are somebody. We call ourselves Unitarian Universalists. We call ourselves Unity Church.

I, for one, take pride in our lineage. But at the same time I am well aware of the pitfalls of concretized identity. "Before I built a wall" wrote Robert Frost, "I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out." There is an inherent tension between declaring ourselves to have a narrowly defined identity and our stated desire to be a church for all people. Despite all our declarations to the contrary most, if not all congregations, limit the breadth of their embrace as they trace their history and come to understand their name.

What is perhaps the best-known scene in English theater sheds light, though it be moonlight, on this primal question. Verona, late one night, Juliet speaks from the balcony of her father's house.

O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face. O, be some other name
Belonging to a man.
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet.

You know the story. You see the problem. The question is what shall we do about it? Capulets and Montagues, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, Catholics and Protestants, men and women, blacks and whites, you and me, do you see the tragedy? We need these names. They help us to know who we are. But oh how they limit our lives.

We call ourselves Unitarian Universalists. These names imply a history, a set of stories, which help us to know who we are and what we stand for. Both Unitarianism and Universalism are religious ideas that stretch back for thousands of years. The first refers to the unity of God; the second to the concept of Universal salvation Both Unitarianism and Universalism first took institutional form in Europe in the 16th century as part of the Protestant Reformation. The modern-day term Unitarian Universalism refers to a merger of the two denominations, which took place in 1961. The Purposes and Principles of our

Association are published just following the preface and before the first hymn in Singing the Living Tradition. I commend them to your attention, not as a creed or a statement of belief but as a set of sources, which inform us and of values to which we together aspire.

We call ourselves Unity Church. Until well into the 19th century both Unitarianism and Universalism were decidedly Christian traditions. With the publication of Emerson's early essay called Nature in 1836 and then in response to his "Divinity School Address" in 1838 we began to ask some basic questions the answers to which would eventually broaden our embrace. "Why should not we, have an original relation with the universe?" Emerson cries out in Nature. He is calling for a way to be religious unmediated by priest or by doctrine. He is calling upon us to live into the experience of the Holy. To find the will and learn the ways to in Tagore's words "*let ourselves be lost and tossed and broken by this fearful joy."* Listen to what he told the graduating seniors at Harvard Divinity School in 1838:

"Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of Man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.' But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer…in the next age, when they said of Jesus, 'This was Jehovah come down out of heaven. I will kill you if you say he was a man.'…He spoke of miracles because he felt that life was a miracle…and he knew that this daily miracle shines as character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."

Emerson's Address lit the fuse for an intra-nicean struggle that's come to be known as the "miracles controversy." The key question became "does Christian faith rest on the belief that Jesus performed miracles?" The old line Unitarians at Harvard said, "absolutely." Emerson and his circle, those who would soon be called, the Transcendentalists, said simply, "no." The conservatives among the Unitarians feared that by rejecting a belief in the miracles the Transcendentalists were establishing a path, which would eventually lead those who followed it away from Christianity into some strange new spiritual landscape the world had never seen. And they were right.

Though they counted some of the first women ordained in America among their ranks, the ministers who worked to give this new way of being religious institutional form called themselves the "Unity Men." They believed, along with Emerson and in their estimation, all true prophets, that the experience of the Holy is one experience. That it is not shaped by language or by culture, but that it is the same no matter what its name. I believe the small group of Boston expatriate families who founded our church called it "Unity" because they had embraced a new way of being religious, a way of being religious that transcends the old divisions, encourages a personal experience of the Holy and gives us, one and all, the power to become the children of God.

In the summer of 1876 our first minister John Effinger, retired due to failing health. The search for his replacement lead the fledgling congregation to a man who would in time become one of the chief architects of liberal religion in America. I can't improve upon the story of his early life and of his call to Unity Church as told by Elinor Sommers Otto in her thoroughly researched monograph The Story of Unity Church 1872-1972 She writes:

"Gannet was the first of the Unity Church ministers to be "born and bred" a Unitarian. His father, Ezra Stiles Gannett, was one of the founders of the American Unitarian Association, its first president, and a colleague and successor of William Ellery Channing, minister of the Federal Street Church (later called the Arlington Street Church) in Boston. The younger Gannett was born in 1840, graduated from Harvard in 1960, and subsequently taught school in Rhode Island. He then entered Harvard Divinity School. Finding himself beset with doubts as to either his ability to teach or his worthiness to be a minister, he interrupted his education to join the New England Freedman's Society, whose task it was to help the half-starving neglected freed slaves on the islands off the coast of South Carolina. In spite of great hardships, including bouts with malaria, Gannett remained there for four years, in which time he managed plantations, opened schools, and devoted himself to what he felt was to be his life's work."

After describing his return to Boston both to care for his ailing father and to reluctantly resume his studies at the Divinity School, Mrs. Otto continues:

This man, now being considered for the ministry of Unity Church, was a true religious spirit, inspired all his life by the words and thoughts of Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Ellery Channing, his godfather. To many contemporary Unitarians Gannett was a radical. Among many other things he offended the conservatives by rewriting hymns and replacing the orthodox texts with new words…Joseph S. Sewall, chairman of the Board of Trustees, began a correspondence with Gannett, who, because of his stoutly held stand against any creed-making tendency and his outspoken liberal attitudes, felt compelled to lay his position before the members of Unity Church. His answer to Sewall, for transmittal to the St. Paul congregation, said in part, "You invite one who is unlikely to add to your numbers…one, too, who can neither offer the communion service nor claim the 'Unitarian' or even the 'Christian' name'"

After no little debate they called him in spite of his radical views. To this very day we have never looked back. Gannett was truly a Unity man. He understood at depth, the dangers of idolatry. He sought never to mistake the finite for the infinite, never to settle into the complacency any creed, no matter how liberal or well intentioned it may be.

So here we are my friends, wandering together, pilgrims in a landscape that the world has never seen. Prophets of a faith ascending "out of every breathing heart, so that the sky is covered with God and God falls to earth as rain." Take pride then in your name. It points back to a lineage of faith. It helps create a framework for our freedom. But bear it gently friends lest that same pride imprison us and keep us from the nourishment we need.

Now let the people say, amen.