

Celebrating 120 Years in Utah: Glimpses of a Distant Perfection  
February 20, 2011

It may be altogether appropriate to note that this church was founded 120 years ago by a missionary. One of the false impressions Unitarians have about themselves is that our history shows no evidence of missionary work. Yet Samuel Atkins Eliot, for whom our social hall is named and who is credited with inspiring the foundation of this church with fiery sermons in 1890, actually left the ministry in 1892 to work for the American Unitarian Association as a "missionary." There was a whole department dedicated to missionary work although they never went door-to-door. They had nothing to sell. Instead, they tried to plant seeds that heralded religious freedom and independent thought, trying to form communities rather than convert one person at a time.

The sales pitch Unitarians used to start new churches in the west and south tried to massage the human intellect...that we were capable of free thought in religious matters because dogma (in the words of Eliot), was merely "other people's formatted beliefs." Own your personal religious journey, influenced by an amalgam of reason, conscience, moral commitments, and natural sensibilities. It was an uphill climb then; it remains an uphill climb today where people still prefer to embrace the formatted beliefs of others.

As recently as 2004, Texas Comptroller, Carole Strayhorn revoked the tax-exempt status of the Unitarian Church in Dennison because it did not have one system of belief. Inexplicably she reversed her decision a few weeks later; my guess is that she was visited by the ghost of Samuel Atkins Eliot.

Eliot was 28 years old when he came to Salt Lake City to preach liberal religion and inspire enough people here to launch a Unitarian Church in the unlikely place of Salt Lake City. Thanks to the extraordinary work of our church member, Lorille Miller, who together with Stan Larson from the Marriott Library wrote the seminal book on the founding of this church, we now know that this church was first organized in the parlor of the Walker House on Wednesday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1891. The first elected president was Nat Brigham, a good name to have to start a new religious organization in Zion. Forty-six people signed on to the three-page constitution.

Four days later, services commenced with the Rev. David Utter who spoke to crowds of many hundreds of intellectually thirsty people in the Salt Lake Theatre. Utter spoke extremely well on the subject that was sweeping liberal religion at that time, namely biblical criticism. Biblical criticism had its origins in Germany in the late 1860's and gradually made it to the States. David Utter brought it to Salt Lake City, which may have led this church to become immediately suspect among the saints.

Our Sunday school opened its doors in the summer of 1891 with an enrollment of 113 kids. By 1903 we purchased our first building at 138 South and 200 East which we sold in 1926 to the Trinity Baptist church so we could build this chapel where we presently meet. This chapel was dedicated September 4, 1927. We were always known as the First Unitarian Society, but at a congregational meeting here in January of 1962, we changed the name to the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City. I am not making a proposal, but I would be pleased if we went back to the referring to ourselves as a Unitarian Society rather than church to be more inviting to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. (I'm just planting a seed).

It's extraordinary, really, to consider that this liberal religious outpost has enjoyed a fulfilling 120 years in an environment not conducive to progressive thinking...making an institution to express progressive values and ideals all that more desirable... and necessary.

In 1860 the Utah Territory had a population of 40,000. By the time Eliot got the wheels in motion for establishing this church, Utah had a population of 200,000 in 1890, with 90% of the population listed as Mormon. Every governor of the Utah Territory was federally appointed, and except for Brigham Young, every governor was non-Mormon. Thus the tradition of clashing with the Utah legislature has been around longer than this church. Just as this church was getting off the ground, LDS president, Wilford Woodruff issued a manifesto in 1890, proclaiming Polygamy as unacceptable. In 1891, Democratic and Republican parties were first organized since Utah needed a two-party system to become a state, which occurred in 1896, five years after the founding of this church. It might be a nice gesture to help us celebrate our 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary if President Monson would once again introduce the two-party system in Utah.

It feels to me that we exist here not only because we want to but because we must. We serve a much higher calling than providing another Unitarian congregation along the American landscape. We have an enormous responsibility, unimaginable to most of our sister congregations...a responsibility to sustain liberal ideals which would otherwise be extinguished. Over the decades we have provided the initial home to organizations like Planned Parenthood and the National Organization of Women; Saturday's Voyeur was first performed by the Salt Lake Acting Company in Eliot Hall. Samuel Atkins Eliot would have had a good laugh if he only knew. As the lead plaintiff in the ACLU case to keep the easement on Main Street entirely public, we took the necessary steps as an institution to protect the First Amendment...just as our founding fathers had envisioned.

We play a crucial role in Utah, not only by providing worship space for the free mind that prefers not to adopt other people's formatted beliefs; but our presence is key in maintaining a free and open public square. Morality and politics intersect in the public square which is why we work tirelessly to ensure the worth and dignity of all people – underscore ALL people – meaning undocumented workers, gays, lesbians, and transgender; the poor, disabled, and all people marginalized in our society. We

are the religious and moral voice that insists that diversity does not mean divisiveness. Inclusivity remains the moral imperative that drives us to work towards justice for all.

I want to go back to before 1891...back to the source which I believe colors our understanding of what religion actually means. William Ellery Channing, who served as mid-wife in the birth of our denomination, officially organizing the American Unitarian Association in 1825, moves me very much even today with his words about faith: "A true faith," he said, "looking up to something better, catching a glimpse of a distant perfection, prophesying to ourselves improvements proportional to our conscientious labors, gives energy of purpose, gives wings to the soul, and this faith will continually grow."

These words could satisfy our mission statement today. We are here, in fact, to catch a glimpse of a distant perfection, work diligently towards realizing that vision, thereby giving wings to our soul. This is how we are (literally) uplifted: By deeds not creeds; improving society by setting it on a course towards justice.

In 1890 we were touched by a missionary, Samuel Atkins Eliot who imbued us from the start with certain sensibilities. He understood what it meant to glimpse a distant perfection. He traveled a great deal as a Unitarian missionary to the Pacific Northwest and to the South in which he was deeply moved to act with conscientious labor to improve the wretched living conditions...as he called it...of Native Americans in the State of Washington and African Americans in Virginia and Alabama.

Eliot's commitment to the cause of Native Americans got the attention of Unitarian president, William Howard Taft who placed Eliot on the U.S. Board of Indian Commissions. While Eliot served as president of the American Unitarian Association, he received an appeal in 1905 from the White House asking our denomination to assist in working with a huge influx of immigrants. The language then was not what we would consider politically correct today; the White House appealed that we work as speedily as possible to help immigrants "shape themselves." The task obviously was to help in the assimilation process which was not a bad word back then. But the face of the immigrant was so different. We worked with immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland as though there were some kind of Scandinavian invasion upon our shores. The only non-Scandinavian immigrants at that time came from Italy.

And still today, though the complexion of immigrants has changed, we in this church continue to follow the religious commandment of offering hospitality: helping immigrants "shape themselves" in their own way as they settle here from Bosnia, Cuba, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. We offer help by sometimes visiting the Swedish Temple called IKEA.

In 1900 there were 457 Unitarian churches in North America, 301 of them in New England. This church was and continues to be a statistical miracle. If you lop off New England, we were one of just 156 Unitarian churches throughout this country and Canada. But we began with the great missionary zeal of Samuel Atkins Eliot who said: "We Unitarians never sufficiently learned the art of irrigation. We have failed to adequately spread the good news."

I believe this church has always done its part in spreading the good news. It has enjoyed the ministry –been blessed by the ministry of such leaders like Jacob Trapp who served here for the eleven years prior to our nation's entry into World War II; Ed Wilson who shaped the humanist commitment by this church after the war; Hugh Gillilan who offered sustenance here during the tumultuous Vietnam years, and Dick Henry, my immediate predecessor who close to 90 now, has just published his latest book on the remarkable friendship between Adlai Stevenson and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Through 120 years, we have tried to make flesh the words of a true faith that catches a glimpse of a distant perfection, and seeks to realize it through conscientious labors.

Today, February 20, 2011, we are eight days away from a trial in Federal Court, reflecting our church's continuation of a deep moral commitment for our time. Historically we have helped shape the moral blueprint of our nation with commitments to the women's suffrage movement, civil rights, marriage equality, civil liberties, prison reform, and labor movements.

Today we face the enormous challenge of climate change where radical lifestyle adjustments and alternate energy and clean air policies might...just might impact the planet enough to where a future can even be viable. But the resistance to forego our dependency on the fossil fuel industries is both incomprehensible and unconscionable. Our church's Environmental Ministry has served as the pre-eminent religious voice in helping guide the conversation and debate as the key moral – not political but moral issue of our time.

Tim DeChristopher, a member of the Environmental Ministry and member of this congregation will stand trial for his act of civil disobedience in 2008, an act which resulted in protecting our wilderness from gas and oil exploitation. He caught a glimpse of a distant perfection.

William Ellery Channing made it very clear when he said: "Unless we are roused to act...unless we engage in the work...unless we elevate our minds...unless what we hear is made a part of ourselves by conscientious reflection, very little permanent is received."

Tim DeChristopher was roused to act through conscientious reflection. He is charged with violating a law that the government has already declared was illegal.

But the lines are drawn and the battle is about sustaining the earth so that a younger generation might have a chance to simply live. So in addition to celebrating the past 120 years, let's look towards the future and continue the tradition whereby we glimpse a distant perfection and are roused to action. Nobody embraces the contemporary Unitarian spirit more than Tim DeChristopher. When he was arrested, he was the same age as was Samuel Atkins Eliot when he spoke in Salt Lake City. To glimpse a distant perfection we must be forward-looking. And so I am honored to invite Tim to finish this sermon as a missionary for our times.