

This selection comes from the Introduction of Rev. Mark Harris' *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011).

When I tell fellow Unitarian Universalists that I serve the First Parish of Watertown, Massachusetts, they are sometimes surprised and generally respond incredulously, "I never knew there was a UU church there."

Unitarian Universalists often assume that UU congregations belong in wealthy suburbs where the grass is greener and the children go to high-achieving schools. This assumption exists alongside the half-defensive, half-optimistic ideology of genuine diversity. Until recently, Watertown was urban, industrial, and populated by working class immigrants. While it is still densely populated, its proximity to Boston has helped the real estate market put a Watertown address out of the price range for most working class people today. Yet one colleague said that his parishioners would consider Watertown a ghetto. This is a minister who would preach that our faith is for all people and should appeal to diverse populations. No wonder we feel confused. I wrote this book because I have been plagued by the need to understand where Unitarian Universalism flourishes and who sits in our pews—and why. [...]

My interest in class issues began nearly forty years ago. At that time I was a graduate student in history working on a thesis about my home town of New Salem, Massachusetts. In the process, I began a journey that led me to the ministry. I discovered two faiths, Unitarianism and Universalism. Both affirmed the use of reason in interpreting the Bible, a loving God who embraced all, and an understanding that human nature was basically good. I juxtaposed my new faith against a childhood religion that taught me a literal understanding of the Bible stories, a judging God who filled me with unending guilt, and a sinful human nature that really could not do anything right or worthy in God's eyes until Jesus saved me. Leaving my childhood faith was easy. I soon came to believe that living out my new faith and sharing it with others was what I was meant to do with my life, and so it has been ever since. [...]

[W]hen I served my first church in the poor New England mill town of Palmer, Massachusetts, a respected colleague with a long Unitarian pedigree told me that my church was only there for historical reasons—the denomination would never start a new UU church in a place like that. It did not fit that stereotype of a green, leafy, rich suburb filled with smart people.

I was raised in one of those places where Unitarianism failed. I served in another place where it was assumed it would fail. Now I once again find myself in a place that is consigned to the UU scrap heap. Rural villages, mill towns, and industrial cities are where, we're told, only uneducated buffoons, the working poor, or ethnic groups live. These places are not home to smart, cultured liberals like us. The population is not our kind.

My thesis on rural Unitarianism forced me to reflect upon the question: Can liberal religion appeal to all classes of people? Ever since my

former colleague looked at my church and said, you don't belong among us, you are not one of us, I have longed to write this book. This is an attempt to respond to the stereotype that we must have a certain pedigree, education, or profession to be Unitarian Universalists.

I have also wondered about class differences on a personal level. My father was a rags-to-riches success story. He spent his childhood living on welfare during the depression after his father's business failed. He used to tell the story of standing in a welfare line for shoes and having to procure two pairs because his brother was too embarrassed to stand with him. I enjoyed the benefits of money growing up, but our family values were pure working class. I became the educated 'idiot' my father both wanted and feared. My education assigns me to a certain class today, but I have often felt confused. With whom do I belong?

Those who promote a stereotype that we must attract a certain type of person in a certain kind of town do us no favors. I first thought UUs were those people who had it made and never had to struggle with anything. As a minister, I have learned that rich and poor, educated by traditional measures or not, all have religious needs that we can respond to.

We don't talk about class very much in Unitarian Universalist circles, giving far more time and energy to race. Class is a hard subject to talk about because many of us grew up believing that America has no class structure, or that most everyone is middle class, or that even if you are poor, we are still all created equal, and you, too, can grow up to be president of the United States. We sometimes say we are all getting richer or that everyone has an equal chance to succeed. Yet in many ways class is the most important predictor of what kind of opportunities someone will have in life. We are stratified financially, socially, and educationally in ways predicted by class. A minister is upper-middle class by virtue of education, even if he or she does not make much money. Unitarian Universalists say they want to work toward greater equality by creating a multicultural and multiracial faith. But how do we do that with respect to class if our racial and cultural diversity all comes from the same socio-economic group? Then again, perhaps it doesn't. We may be more diverse than we think, and accept the elite stereotype to evoke liberal guilt.

The essential question is: Who belongs with us? Sometimes Unitarian Universalists believe the stereotype that we are only educated suburbanites, when it is clearly not true. My wife grew up as one of six children in a family that struggled to survive economically, yet she is a born UU and so is her mother. Many Unitarian Universalists live in marginal economic circumstances or do not have college educations. I believe that at heart Unitarian Universalists long to have a faith that learns from all kinds of people, rich and poor. I never want to feel there is anyone, including myself, who does not belong. [...]

Th[e] vision of a democratic, open faith for all kinds of people has long been part of our expressed dreams, but we have never been able to

make this vision manifest. That is why I wrote this book. I started with my own home town and family shadows. Most of this book contains what I discovered about the shadows of my faith community. Now I want to use that journey to call us to a faith that can be shared among all classes of people. Perhaps Unitarian Universalism is a thinking person's faith, but we can find thinking people in all classes and stripes of society. Perhaps we will learn that not all genuine thought leads to the same conclusion. We can all learn and change when we find ways to reach out to others.

Margaret Fuller, a leading Transcendentalist who is sometimes called America's first feminist, once [received a letter from] her Unitarian father, "Your reluctance to go 'among strangers' cannot too soon be overcome; & the way to overcome it, is not to remain at home, but to go among them and resolve to deserve & obtain the love & esteem of those, who have never before known you. With them you have a fair opportunity to begin the world anew . . ." Our theology says this vision to "begin the world anew" must be with all kinds of people, not just with the social circle we create or like-minded liberals. It must be practiced in an ever-intentional manner and in ever-widening circles if our faith is going to be truly transformational. Perhaps this is how Unitarian Universalism can fulfill its democratic vision, and become more than a faith for a few.