

Kenneth Patton: Universalist Mystical Humanist

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Our Religious Education program is focusing this year on Unitarian Universalist identity and history. In keeping with that overarching theme, I have chosen to present a number of services this winter and spring dealing with our history as a religious movement. In particular, I will be looking at a number of important personalities who have helped to shape our movement.

On Mothers Day in May, we'll look at Unitarian Julia Ward Howe, one of the founders of Mothers Day, and will try and recapture her original vision of a Mothers Day for Peace. Then, a couple of weeks later we'll celebrate the two-hundredth birthday of prominent Unitarian and Transcendentalist thinker Margaret Fuller, one of the great pioneers of feminism and liberal religion. But today we look at someone from our more recent history: a minister who served both Unitarian and Universalist congregations, and who provided liturgical materials still used widely throughout the Unitarian Universalist world.

My aim this morning has been to let Kenneth Patton speak to us directly through his words and songs. But I would like to speak *about* his life and work as well, in order to provide some historical context. Most of what I'll share comes from an article by the Rev. Maryell Cleary, who has also edited a number of works by and about Patton.

Kenneth Leo Patton was born August 25, 1911, and died at the age of 83 in 1994. Considered as one of the major poets and a prophet of contemporary liberal religion, his was a voice for a poetic, naturalistic humanism at a time when most humanists were defining a religion of reason. Minister and scholar David Bumbaugh has summed up Patton's work like this: "It was he who taught a monotone rationalism how to sing; it was he who taught a stumble-footed humanism how to dance; it was he who cried 'Look!' and taught our eyes to see the glory in the ordinary."

Born in Three Oaks, a small town in western Michigan, Patton lived his early years there with his mother, brother and maternal grandparents. He never knew his father. His family belonged to a strict Methodist church. He attended two church services on Sundays, morning and evening, and in between the adults allowed no secular amusements. He recalled hearing cheers and shouts from the neighboring baseball field on Sunday afternoons, wanting to join in but not allowed to.

When he was eight or nine Patton moved with his mother and brother to a working-class suburb of Chicago. There he graduated from high school, the first in the family to do so. He went on to junior college, working at night to finance art lessons on Saturdays. Thus began his lifelong passion for the visual arts. At the age of 20 he began writing poetry, which he continued throughout his life.

Though he would have liked a career in art, Patton chose ministry as a way to support his family and make use of his talent in writing and speaking. While serving several Disciples of Christ churches in small mid-Illinois towns, he also commuted to the University of Chicago to work on a degree in theology. There he learned that religion could be much more than a set of dogmas, that it could include all the arts as well.

In 1942, one of his Chicago professors suggested that Patton, now a confirmed humanist, apply for the open pulpit of the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin. Patton did so, and served that congregation until January, 1949. He helped the Society obtain the services of famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright for the design of its new building, although it was not built

until after Patton had moved on. Also while in Madison, he published his first three books. His poetry and poetic prose, celebrating humanism and naturalism in religion, established him as a major spokesperson for this still new approach to religion.

In a radio talk during those years Patton casually said that he would like to "resign from the white race and become a colored man." To his surprise this catapulted him into notoriety. A national magazine asked him to explore the extent of racial prejudice in Chicago by attempting to integrate restaurants, hotels, country clubs and real estate. That experience, and a visit to an interracial housing project, had a profound effect on him. In his own words, from an article in the Unitarian *Christian Register*, "I have 'crossed the line' through a deeply emotional experience and I have no desire to cross back. Where I now am is where every honest man will one day have to be."

In 1949 Patton was invited to become minister of the Charles Street Meeting House, an experimental church in Boston created by Clinton Lee Scott and the Massachusetts Universalist Convention. They hoped to revitalize Universalism and to reinstate a Universalist presence in Boston. Since Universalists' traditional message, that a loving God would not condemn anyone to hell, had been accepted by other denominations, Universalists needed a new focus and a wider scope. Patton's fifteen-year ministry redefined the meaning of the word "Universalism" by bringing the arts and the symbolism of all religions and cultures into "a religion for one world."

Patton threw himself into this venture with both mind and body. Colleague Charles Reinhardt recalls coming into the Meeting House one morning and finding him on his knees painting a mural of the Andromeda Galaxy for the proscenium. Says Reinhardt, "He looked like a happy kid building a terrific model airplane." His enthusiasm was contagious. Although the Meeting House congregation was never large, a dedicated core group supported this new realization of religious art, coming regularly to Friday evening work nights. Together, Patton and his congregation built an outstanding art collection. To give you some idea of the Meeting House as a physical presence, let me quote some excerpts from Patton's pamphlet, *Art and Symbols for a Universal Religion*:

The Meeting House has one basic and simple idea: to find a religious setting for a religion of one humanity and one world. . . .
What are the fundamental symbols for such a universal religion? . . . First is the universe itself. . . . At the front of the auditorium . . . we have reproduced the Great Nebula in Andromeda from astronomical photographs. . . . The earth is symbolized by a large polar-projection map of the earth inlaid in linoleum in the very center of the auditorium. . . . Around this is a golden circle, which we have chosen as the master symbolism of Universalism. The circle is found in all cultures, and has variously symbolized the universe, the sun, the moon, the earth, unity, perfection, holiness, peace. The earth within the circle is repeated downstairs, with the symbols of the world's religions inscribed upon it at the point of their origin.

The pews have been rearranged to face in four banks toward the center. . . . Thus the people, being seated in a circle, symbolize unity and one world in their very arrangement. . . .

On the platform at the front is a large bookcase which houses the major writings of all the world cultures and religions. . . .

Alongside these core symbols is the symbol project itself. . . ,
Made up of some sixty-five symbols taken from the world religions, ancient
and modern, and symbols of the “universals,” of the common ideals, goals,
and occupations of humanity. . . The designing, research and execution of
these symbols took five years. . .

The whole of the auditorium of the meeting House has been made into
one integrated symbol.

While at the Meeting House Patton wrote a prodigious amount of worship material. He
also arranged as hymns and readings material from great poets like Walt Whitman, and
selections from the world's scriptures. Using a mimeograph machine and a printing press in the
church basement, Patton published pamphlets, books and sermons. Patton's most ambitious
project, *A Religion for One World*, published by Beacon Press in 1964, gave an in-depth account
of this experiment in universal religion. Here is an excerpt from that work:

Anthropologists believe that many of the so-called tribal cultures,
rather than being really “primitive,” are the result of a disintegration of
higher cultures in the past. Of one thing we can be sure: this movement
and mixture of the people of the human race, which the anthropologists call
“diffusion,” was an immensely long and involved process. We have only
begun to trace it. Without in any way minimizing the cultural differences of
humanity, we may say that the outcome of this diffusion has been a
universal sharing of basic cultural inventions which justifies our assertion
that there is only one human culture. The differences are only variations
within an impressive unity. It is because of this inherent unity of the human
community that a people can move in one generation from an untouched
tribal condition to an awareness of the need to live in the world community.
. . It is for this reason that the grandson of a cannibalistic Melanesian
chieftain can win a Ph.D. in a great university. The differences between our
cultures may seem to be vast, but the fact that the basis of all these
variations is fundamentally the same allows movement from one cultural
style to another within a generation or two.

When the newly-merged Unitarian Universalist Association needed a new hymnal, Patton
was an obvious choice for a place on the Hymnbook Commission. Many of the hymns and
readings used in the Meeting House became part of *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, published
in 1964. I counted thirteen hymns and twenty-three readings by Patton in that hymnal. While he
is not so dominant in our more recent 1993 hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* (that’s the gray
one that we use now), it does still contain several of his hymns and readings.

Alas, even those religious leaders and ministers that we celebrate and honor for their
leadership, innovation, and distinctive vision, are still merely human. Patton's outspoken and
provocative preaching offended many, including his more conservative colleagues in the
Massachusetts Universalist Convention. His inability to be a pastoral minister drove parishioners
away. His single-mindedness led him to ignore others' concerns and to respond with irritation to
their needs. Often tendentious, he refused to compromise or even listen to other points of view.

In practice, as a minister, he charged ahead with his own projects and relied on lay leadership to take care of church finances and membership growth.

Yes, Kenneth Patton had his limitations and shortcomings. But there was much in his life and work to admire. As a minister, Patton was an iconoclast. He disdained any special treatment as a clergyman. He would not call himself "Reverend," saying that he was no more to be revered than anyone else. He never used the honorific, "Doctor," though entitled to do so by an honorary degree. He refused to wear a pulpit robe, even at his own installation service. He did not preach sermons, he gave addresses, and not in a church sanctuary but in a meeting house.

Patton did not join organizations for the liberation of any group or to promote any social issue, yet he preached powerful sermons on such subjects. Controversial organizations, including the Communist Party, found space for their gatherings at the Meeting House. In his early works he used "man" as a synonym for the human race, as was usual in those times. Later, however, he did adopt the use of inclusive language. He also revised some of his earlier writings accordingly.

Patton praised unstintingly writers, such as Carl Sagan, Richard Leakey, Jane Goodall, Lewis Thomas, and Loren Eiseley, whose work he admired for insight into nature and contemporary science. He wrote of his own sense of identification with natural process - "We love the world, loving ourselves as part of the world" - and of his feelings of wonder: "Wonder is forever in grass and weeds, in animals and people, in the flesh, a flame on our tongues. If our labors are fruitful, it is working upon wonder, to open wonder through our works. . . Work is making love to the world."

After fifteen years at the Charles Street Meeting House, Patton felt a need of a larger and more secure income, and he left to accept an invitation to be the minister of the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey. He retired at the ripe old age of 75 in 1986, and died of congestive heart failure in his Ridgewood home on Christmas Day, 1994.

All in all, Kenneth Patton wrote nearly thirty books, defining his vision of religion and his philosophy of life, celebrating the natural world and the integral role of humanity in it, and simply expressing poetically his wonder and joy in life. He will be particularly remembered for the hymns and readings used so often in liberal religious services. Perhaps most often used, and most familiar, is the reading, "Let Us Worship," with which I opened our service this morning. I leave you, now, with a few of its lines:

Let us worship with eyes, ears, and fingertips.
Let us love the world through heart and mind and body.
Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

So may it be.