

“No One Turned Away”©

by

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Presented at

Hopedale Unitarian Parish

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On Adin Ballou Sunday

INTRODUCTION

This morning I am going to talk about Adin Ballou. As I undertake this task—call it a labor of love—I am aware that some here today may be hearing about Adin Ballou for the first time, and others will know much more about him than I do—because you have read most of his published works or even edited them for publication or heard numerous sermons from this very pulpit or speeches about him.

That kind of diversity of knowledge about a particular subject is common in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Several years ago, I was theme speaker at a Star Island conference. Star Island is a Unitarian Universalist, UU, conference center in the Gulf of Maine. My theme was how to take some of the loving, peaceful community that people often experience on Star Island for a week and bottle it up and take it back to the mainland. I discussed some of the resistances that prevented this from happening and suggested ways to overcome them.

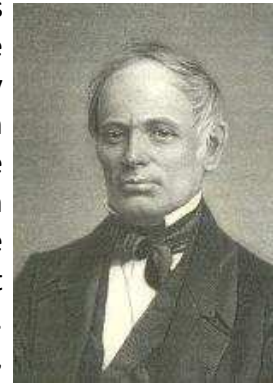
To give perspective on my theme, I presented some of the ideas of renowned Harvard developmental psychologist Robert Kegan about how contemporary life makes mental demands on us that few of us are capable of handling. I mentioned something similar about Robert Kegan, as I just said about Adin Ballou, that probably some UU present knew more about what I was talking about than I did and then I joked that probably someone there may have written their PhD dissertation about Robert Kegan’s ideas. After I finished my talk, a woman came up to me and apologized saying that she would miss my next two talks because she would be off the island to attend to a post-doctoral seminar at Harvard with Robert Kegan. She said, “Oh Robert Kegan was my PhD advisor at Harvard.”

This is a bit of a roundabout way of describing the approach I am taking this morning when talking about Adin Ballou and the early Hopedale Community. First I am assuming that some of you know little about Adin Ballou and second, I am going to pose the question that I posed on Star Island. How can we bottle up some of the inspirations from the early Hopedale Community and bring them into our lives today and into the life of this congregation? And to help answer this question, I will consider maybe a somewhat different perspective on why the

Hopedale Community, after 14 years, closed or “failed” as Adin Ballou termed it. And in understanding why it failed we can build a strong community for today.

BALLOU WALKED HIS TALK

First let me tell you something about Adin Ballou. He felt called in his youth to be a Christian minister. At first he thought those who believed in Universal salvation or the saving of all souls regardless of birth, belief or sin were in his words, “anti-religious in spirit, anti-Christian in doctrine.”¹ In the early 1820s as a young man, like many Universalists, Adin Ballou had a conversion experience influenced by his reading of scripture and asking some probing questions of church doctrine from what he read in the Bible. He also was influenced by the sermons of a Philadelphia Baptist minister Elhanah Winchester who began preaching around the time of the American Revolution that the true meaning of Jesus’ teachings was restoration of all souls—not just an elect few. Winchester quipped that if God can save him, God can save anyone. Winchester said to his congregation at First Baptist Church in Philadelphia, God “has taught us to do good to all? And will [God] not [do] much more . .



Elhanah Winchester (1751-1797), pioneer preacher of Universalism

. . good to all [than he asks us to do]?”² For preaching these ideas of universal salvation, much like Bishop Carlton Pearson who we will hear this afternoon, Winchester lost his congregation although a portion of his congregation followed him who later would become members of the Universalist Church in America.

Adin Ballou, despite his initial struggles with these inspirations of Universal salvation, finally became a Universalist minister—serving Universalist congregations in Massachusetts including nearby Milford and then New York City. He later parted with the Universalists because of disagreement over whether all humans were admitted to Heaven after death regardless of the kind of life one led or whether there was a period of punishment for sinners followed

¹Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985. p125.

²Ibid. 52.

by restoration to Heaven. Ballou was part of the latter group of Restorations. After parting company with the Universalist Church, he served as the Unitarian minister in Mendon—just up the road.

Yet the larger Universalist spirit remained with Ballou. Universalists sought to define themselves as the spiritual decedents of the early Christians³ and followers of Jesus' true teachings. Adin Ballou thought that Christians should live the life of peace and justice-making, like Jesus taught and lived, in all aspects of their lives.

For Adin Ballou, it was not enough to preach that all human beings are children of God and that we should love God with all our heart, mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. We should live Jesus' teachings every moment of our lives—in everything we do.

So to do this, he led the formation of a community in Milford, later to become Hopedale, for the purposes of living Christian values of loving your neighbors, loving you enemies, charity, sharing your wealth equally, justice-making, and working to heal suffering where it was found.

THE CRUCIAL TENSION

The members of the early Hopedale Community were abolitionists, pacifists, held equality of the sexes, and eschewed disparities in pay in one's work. They sought to live the Christian communitarianism of Jesus. When I speak of the communitarianism of Jesus, I mean "communitarianism" as the idea that we need "to balance individual rights and interests with that of the community as a whole, and that individual people are shaped by the cultures and values of their communities."⁴ Jesus taught mostly about the Kingdom of Heaven which was his call to shape communities founded on the spiritual values of love of God and neighbor and justice-making for all.

As such, members of the Hopedale Community took in people who had fallen on hard times never stinting the hand of charity. They deeply respected each other and lived the values of loving your neighbor. The members of the community were also strong individualists too. Adin Ballou stood strongly for the sanctity of individual conscience, in his words but even more strongly in his deeds. His principled individualism—probably his greatest strength that led him from Universalism to found the Hopedale Community—would become later a weakness for him as well.

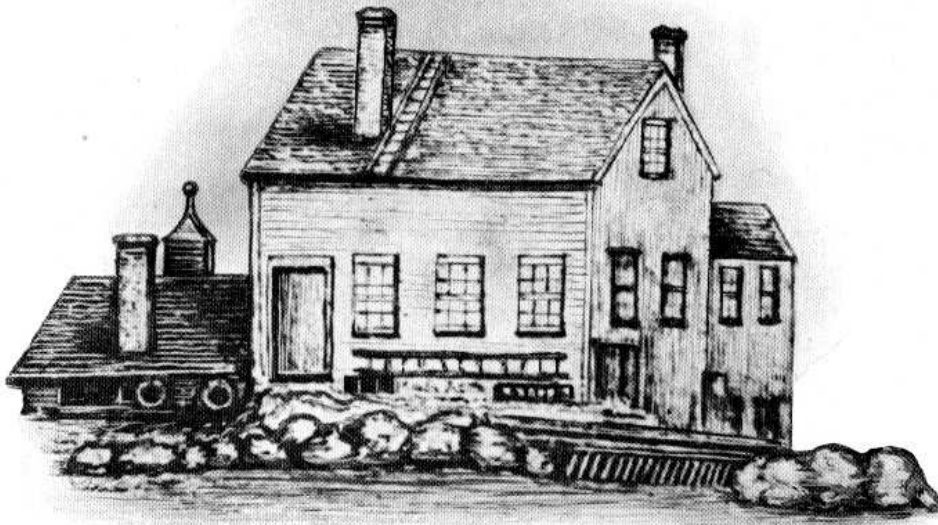
The point I am making is that it was the unresolved tension between the Christian communitarian values and the individualism of the time that eventually brought about the demise of the Hopedale Community. Adin Ballou talks about the reasons for the failure of the

³ Ibid. 124.

⁴ "Communitarianism" <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communitarianism>.

Hopedale Community in his *History of the Hopedale Community*⁵ in which he describes how two brothers, Ebenezer and George Draper, who were members of the Community, had acquired three-quarters of its stock. The brothers decided to withdraw their stock from the community at a time when, in Ballou's words, "we had attained an apparently praiseworthy and permanent success."⁶

The Draper brothers had developed a successful business through leading innovation in the manufacturing of textile knitting machinery. They withdrew their stock in the Hopedale Community because they disagreed with its business practices.



Original Shop in 1841

Adin Ballou, despite admitting this withdrawal of stock caused the collapse of the Hopedale Community and although disagreeing with the actions of the Draper brothers, refused to condemn them and praised them for their contributions to the Hopedale Community. Adin Ballou thought that the failure was inevitable because the community, in his words, "lacked the wisdom, the grace, the large-mindedness, the generosity, the nobility of soul, in a single word, the Christlikeness that was requisite to the end we sought . . ."⁷

⁵ Ballou, Adin. *History of the Hopedale Community*. Providence, RI: Blackstone Editions, 2010.

⁶ Ballou, 228.

⁷ Ballou, 231.

Then only a few words later, Adin Ballou states what, I have come to believe, is the fundamental reason the Hopedale Community failed, and it had nothing to do with the community not being large-minded, generous, or noble enough. Here is what Ballou wrote referring to the Hopedale Community:

The movement rested wholly on the basis of the inherent and infeasible individual rights of its members [. . .] I always held these sacred and never attempted to dictate, coerce, overrule, or over-persuade anyone even to save the Community from dissolution.”

In these words, Adin Ballou stated that the ultimate value practiced was individualism and not the communitarian spirit that is so much a vital part, of Jesus’ teachings. And Adin Ballou’s refusal to stand for the common good over individual interests rung the death knell for the Community.

THE COMMUNITY’S CONUNDRUM THEN; OURS TODAY

This is not to criticize Adin Ballou or the Draper brothers or the Hopedale Community in general. It only expresses what has been called the “most basic conundrum of American life”—the tension between an extreme individualism in the American character, on the one hand, and the needs of all members of communities to flourish and prosper, on the other. This unsolved conundrum is what ultimately brought down the Hopedale Community and is still a major challenge to liberal religion today—particularly Unitarian Universalism—and our nation as well.

This “most basic conundrum of American life” was articulated by sociologist Robert Bellah in a lecture at the UU General Assembly in 1998 in Rochester, New York.⁸ Bellah, who was professor emeritus of sociology at University of California at Berkeley and an astute observer of American religion and culture, observed that UU’s keep getting tripped up by our adherence to individualism as our primary value. He said that there is nothing wrong with holding individual conscience as an important value. But, Bellah observed that, from the beginning in American, the sacredness of individual conscience was linked with the freedom to pursue one’s own economic interests. In American culture, he stated, we have lost the sense of the sacredness of the individual conscience that chooses based on the big values like “justice, equity, compassion in human relations,” and all we have left are economic interests with the big decisions made primarily based on money.

⁸ Bellah, Robert N. "Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective." Unitarian Universalist Association, General Assembly, Rochester, N.Y. June 27, 1998.

http://www.uua.org/documents/bellahrobert/980627_uu_societal_perspective.pdf.

This, Bellah said, “opens the door to the worst in our culture. It easily leads to the idea that humans are nothing but self-interest maximizers, and devil take the hindmost. It is that version that we see all around us. I don’t think we can challenge that version” Bellah said, “until we come to see that the sacredness of the individual depends ultimately on our solidarity with all being, not on the vicissitudes of our private selves.”⁹

Robert Bellah described much of the underlying dynamics of what, I think, happened to the Hopedale Community. Ultimately, when it came down to individual rights, the values that articulated the individual rights were not those big values of peaceful living, justice-making, charity, compassion, and even democratic processes, but the individual rights that were defended by Adin Ballou were the lesser values to pursue one’s own economic interests.

Jesus was very clear about this when he said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. What Jesus was teaching about was that to follow his example and to be his disciple, we must live from the big values of the Spirit and the common good, not from economic interests.

It’s deeply ironic that a community founded on following Jesus’ teachings would fail because its leader would not, in Ballou’s own words, “overrule . . . even to save the Community.”¹⁰

THE LESSONS OF THE HOPEDALE COMMUNITY FOR TODAY

This is not to condemn Adin Ballou but to only say that he was, as we all are, products of the times in which we live. We are all born with our conceptual blinders that have to do with prevailing cultural attitudes and even the language we use comes with its conceptual blinders. The irony, of course, is that my comments too are products of our postmodern age, our present culture and ways of thinking.

Adin Ballou however commented that his hope in writing his *History of the Hopedale Community* was that those who follow could learn from their experience. The Hopedale Community got much right but what it had wrong was to rely, at a critical time, too much on extreme individualism of the Enlightenment when the emphasis should have been on standing for the common good of the community. There was too much of the Enlightenment individualistic focus of “I think, therefore I am,” rather than the wiser African aphorism: “I am, because we are.”

At that moment, when the Draper brothers were considering pulling out their shares, the Hopedale Community needed a strong, visionary leader to say, “Stop! This is not right, because it does not advance the common good of the community.” ‘At that moment, however,

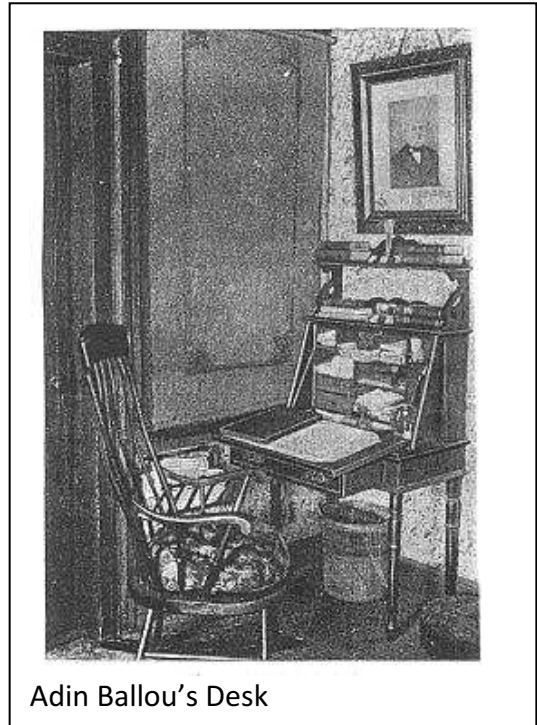
⁹ Bellah.

¹⁰ Ballou, 232.

the leaders of the Hopedale Community held the individual's right to choose from self-interest higher than the right to choose from the common good.

There is no use mentioning this other than to learn from it to build stronger communities for today. The Hopedale Community did so much right. It was a justice-seeking community that lived its values of loving your neighbor as yourself. It stood against slavery, war-making, and social inequities. In an age when only men could vote and it was legal to hold slaves, the Community's Constitution stated: "All members . . . shall stand on a footing of personal equality, irrespective of sex, color, occupation, wealth, rank, or any other adventitious peculiarity."¹¹ (I love that phrase "adventitious peculiarity"—"adventitious" meaning "by chance" and showing some of Adin Ballou's humor.)

Individual members of the Community realized that their own welfare depended upon the welfare of others. Wealth was shared in the community. Diversity was welcomed. Charity abounded. All members participated in decision-making. The Community members liked each other. They felt comfortable in engaging in vigorous debate but never let go of their mutual love and respect for each other. And humor and joy permeated the life of the Community. All of what I mentioned as positive aspects of the Hopedale Community are expressions of communitarian values that reside at the heart of Jesus' teachings. These are the values we need to bottle up from the early Hopedale Community for use today and let the values of extreme individualism go.



Adin Ballou's Desk

¹¹Ballou, p21.

CONCLUSION

The Persian Muslim poet and sage Omar Khayyám wrote:

"The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it."

And Hopedale moved on. The Draper brothers' business was hugely successful. The owners of the business and their descendants became exceedingly wealthy, but unlike many industrialists of their time, they used their wealth responsibly—providing for their employees, managing their business in a way as not to degrade the local community, and finally bequeathing some of that wealth to the community. I suspect that the legacy of the common good practiced by the original Hopedale Community became instilled in the corporate culture of the Draper Corporation and guided many of their decisions.



And later this beautiful church was built by that industrial wealth and is still sustained by it in the form of financial endowments. And Adin Ballou became the first minister of Hopedale Unitarian Parish. But much, much more is present here than this beautiful church building, the people who came here and come here today have a beauty of spirit—part of that beauty



Adin Ballou Memorial, Hopedale

too comes from those values and visions held by

Adin Ballou and the early Hopedale Community where we love and respect each other and celebrate our “adventitious peculiarities.”

It is then for us in this church, residing at the center and the heart of today's Hopedale, to keep those visions alive of a justice-seeking community of hope and peace—in this dale of hope. May it be so. In a world without end. Amen.