

Thoughtful Religion
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Whatever else we do, here, now, in this place made sacred by the love of generations...
Whatever else we do... may we seek to touch and be touched by the spirit of life, by
whatever name we call it...

May we pause long enough, slow our breathing and our thinking long enough...
... to renew and deepen our connection to our own pulsing heart...
... to renew and deepen our connection with the pulsing heart of all life.
... that we might live knowing and feeling that we are linked, one with another, and with
all life, linked in circles of kindness and compassion, linked in circles of hope and
courage... linked... hand holding hand, heart touching heart, life touching life...

Whatever else we do...
may we seek to touch and be touched – and moved – by the spirit of life...

Readings

from “Spiritual Freedom”
by Rev. William Ellery Channing - 1830
(portions of responsive reading number 592)

I call that mind free which... passes life, not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in
hungering, thirsting, and seeking righteousness.

I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not
content itself with a passive or hereditary faith: Which opens itself to light whencesoever it
may come...

I call that mind free... which does not cower to human opinion...

I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy
the past... but which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience...

I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights
in virtue and sympathizes with suffering.... Which recognizes in all human beings the image
of God and the rights of God’s children...

from “Keep the Circle Whole: The Challenge of Unitarian Universalist Theology” by Rebecca Parker - 2006

While we (Unitarian Universalists) are open to many things, there remains a definite boundary of what we embrace and what we leave outside. You can't really believe ANYTHING and be a Unitarian Universalist...

For example: You can hold the view that there is no God, or that God exists. But you cannot hold the view that God is the all-powerful determiner of everything that happens such that there is no exercise of human freedom. Unitarian Universalism is clear that there is some measure of freedom, accessible to every living being, given in the nature of things. We hold that freedom is real and is an essential characteristic of life.

You can define salvation, healing, and wholeness in many ways. But you cannot hold to the view that there will be an ultimate separation of the saved from the damned in which the good are rewarded with eternal bliss and the damned are punished with eternal suffering. Unitarian Universalism is clear that all souls are of worth...

You can be devoted to a specific religious practice... but you cannot hold the view that there is one religion that encompasses the exclusive, final truth for all times and places. Not even Unitarian Universalism...

Finally, you can see this world as tragically flawed, wondrously gifted, or all of the above, but you cannot hold the view that salvation is to be found solely beyond this world – in some life after death or a world other than this world. While remaining open to mysteries that may be revealed beyond the grave or in realms beyond what we know at present, Unitarian Universalism is clear that the ultimate is present here and now, and can be grasped and experienced, if only partially, within this limited frame of our moral existence... We hold that this world, this life, these bodies, are the dwelling place of the sacred.

Within these theological boundaries there is room for tremendous variety, diversity, and dissent. But there is also a defining focus: a devotion to the flourishing of life.

Our sacred circle draws us together in passionate love for life.

Sermon

William Ellery Channing, who was to grow up to become one of the leading voices, if not the leading voice, of American Unitarianism in the first half of the 19th century, was born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1780.

An anecdote frequently re-told by biographers – indeed, frequently re-told by Channing himself in his later years, has to do with a church-going experience he had when still a small boy.

He had been taken to a revival meeting by his father to hear a famous itinerant preacher. The preacher, Channing related, “made such a terrific picture of the lost condition of the human race rushing into hell... that it filled my imagination with horror.”

Though terrified by the sermon, Channing recounts as well that at the same time he felt a bit of skepticism concerning this frightening message. But that kernel of skepticism was crushed, when upon leaving the meeting his father said to a friend, “Sound doctrine that! Leaves no rag of self-righteousness to wrap the sinner in!”

Yet... on the way home, as biographer Jack Mendelsohn recounts the tale, young Channing's father began to whistle. At home they sat down to their dinner table “eaten with not

a word to indicate the extraordinary danger suggested by the sermon.” Afterwards his “father took his pipe and a newspaper, sat down before the fire, removed his shoes, and began calmly to read.”

What was going on here?!

As Mendelsohn describes the insight that came to Channing at that moment, an insight that helped to shape his entire future life and ministry, Channing realized that one must withhold “judgment upon what people say until one is able to divine by their actions what they *mean*.” Most importantly of all, young Channing was thinking at an early age!

In this spirit, near the end of his life he wrote, in a letter to his old friend, transcendentalist Elizabeth Peabody, that “I have never hesitated to say clearly and strongly what I was persuaded was *true*. But I have not ‘dared’ to send forth opinions around which doubts and objections lingered in my own mind.”

Thoughtful religion. Channing was in his generation perhaps the foremost exemplar in New England if not the nation of what I’m calling thoughtful religion. The early Unitarian ideas which he came to espouse, clearly articulated in his famous 1819 sermon “Unitarian Christianity”: Among them that reason ought to be applied to the reading and understanding of scripture; that God is a *unity*, not a *trinity*; that Jesus is *one being*, human and distinct from God; and that salvation has to do with a “moral, or spiritual deliverance” through the instruction and example of Jesus and our own inward conscience – all these ideas are in many ways of less importance than the method by which Channing came to affirm them: Thoughtful religion. The free use of our innate powers of understanding and reason unfettered, as we heard in the reading, by a “passive or hereditary faith” or by “the bondage of habit.”

Thoughtful religion.

Which does not mean cold religion, religion centered only in the head – though that has always been a danger in the Unitarian approach to religion and spirituality. (Indeed, Channing’s younger contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson railed against what he called “corpse cold Unitarianism.”) But remember that Channing also calls “that mind free which sets no bounds to its love.”

In other words there is a purpose for our freedom, for our reason, and that purpose has to do not only with how we understand our lives, but with how we live our lives, how we strive to improve ourselves and the world around us, how we, again in Channing’s words, “sympathize with suffering” and do what we can to alleviate that suffering.

And so “thoughtful religion” takes on a second layer of meaning – yes, thoughtful in terms of how we apply our minds to religious and spiritual questions, yet also thoughtful in terms of how we apply our hearts, if you will, to our daily lives one with another.

Today we can affirm that in both of these senses, more than in the ways in which Channing remained rooted spiritually primarily in his Christian identity, we remain inheritors of Channing’s legacy of thoughtful religion.

Now, as Unitarian *Universalists* we also inherit the legacy of Hosea Ballou and other early American Universalists. A contemporary of Channing, Ballou too affirmed the critical importance of applying reason to our understanding of scripture and of life. Ballou too rejected the trinity (he likened the doctrine to “infinity multiplied by three”).

Yet along with other Universalists of the time, he placed special emphasis on one particular conclusion at which he and others arrived through their reasoned reading of scripture,

and this was that salvation was assured for *all* souls – this doctrine of universal salvation giving its name to this strand of our religious heritage.

Now, if it sounds as though Channing and Ballou must have been two peas in a theological pod, the more so when you learn that they both served pulpits in Boston for many of the same years, both lived on Beacon Hill... in fact they apparently did not have a personal relationship and most certainly had their public disagreements and debates. They disagreed, for example, over the issue of church-state separation, and they disagreed over the theological question of salvation: Channing and many other Unitarians of the time affirming “salvation by character” by development of virtue and morality through what Channing called “self-culture”; and Ballou and most other Universalists of the era affirming what Ballou playfully called “salvation irrespective of character,” salvation dependent not on the virtue of clearly imperfect if not sinful human beings, but dependent on an all-loving and forgiving God.

Even so, for whatever their differences, Channing and Ballou were both living exemplars of what today I am calling “thoughtful religion.” Yet both – and in this they were not alone, but were representative of many others of their time, including the ministers of this congregation – affirmed that we must use reason as guide to understanding and as guide to how we choose to live as moral beings in a moral universe.

Parenthetically, let me be clear that Unitarian Universalists hardly have a corner on the market of thoughtful religion – which is a good thing, since we are so few. There are many others, of many faiths, who affirm the place of reason and freedom in matters of the spirit. Not only that, but the history of thoughtful religion is longer than many might suppose. Indeed, the Buddha told his students only to follow those of his teachings that they found through their own reasoning and experience to be true. Jesus questioned many of the orthodoxies of his time. The list of exemplars of thoughtful religion is long.

And none of this means that we will always agree in religious or spiritual, much less in (dare I say it) political or social matters. Quite the contrary actually. As we’ve learned, even close religious cousins Channing and Ballou did not agree on every point of belief or doctrine, religious or political; yet both were exemplars of thoughtful religion.

Likewise, we heard in the second reading our contemporary, Rebecca Parker, affirm that within certain “theological boundaries there is room for tremendous variety, diversity, and dissent.”

Well, there better be room; because there will be in the nature of things, certainly in the nature of free religious community, not to mention in the nature of life... variety, diversity, and dissent. We surely see that diversity today among Unitarian Universalists. Among us are practicing Buddhists as well as praying Christians. Among us are theist, agnostic, humanist, atheist. On it goes.

Yet Parker also affirms, you cannot believe *anything* and still consider yourself a Unitarian Universalist. Much as we might like to think we can believe *anything*... we cannot, not reasonably anyway. We follow not whim, but reason, heart-centered reason – but reason.

This said, I recall quite well that when my parents first joined a Unitarian Universalist church, when I was eleven years old, I was particularly enthralled and enthusiastic, since here was a religion (as I understood it at the time) that allowed you, indeed encouraged you, to believe whatever you wanted to believe! That sort of freedom is heady for anyone, surely for an eleven-year-old boy – on the cusp of that time of life when freedom is valued perhaps above all else. Free to believe whatever you want!

Yet alas (...and actually for the good) Rebecca Parker is right. You *can't* believe just anything and still consider yourself a Unitarian Universalist. We inherit a tradition of thoughtful religion, yes, and it is thoughtful religion which has led us to some generally accepted conclusions among us about the nature of life, of the world, of the religious quest and the spiritual journey.

So, it's true that we do not have a creed to which one must assent in order to be considered a card-carrying UU in good standing. And we might disagree to one extent or another over just precisely where to draw those "theological boundaries" about which Rebecca Parker wrote.

But it is clear, isn't it, paraphrasing Parker, that one could hardly call oneself a Unitarian Universalist without affirming our human freedom in some degree and the importance of reason as we exercise that freedom; or without affirming the worth, or at least the potential of worth, of every human soul; or without affirming a spirit of inclusion and unity rather than exclusion, exclusiveness, division; or without affirming the sacredness (by whatever name you might call it) of *this* life... whatever you might believe or not about another life yet to come; or without a dedication to living one's life according to values of kindness, compassion, love, justice, peace.

Now, some, ultra-liberal on one side, ultra-conservative on the other, might declare through their words or their actions that "thoughtful religion" is an oxymoron, that religion is by its nature a matter of faith that transcends reason, faith in things unseen: believe it or somehow know it is "God's will" because tradition or the Bible or the Koran or the minister or priest says it is so. So, some would jettison religion altogether as a pernicious force in human affairs (and a case can be made, that's for sure); and others hold to exclusivist versions of religion, my way or the highway caricatures of faith and spirit that are destructive than constructive of a broader human community and peace.

But far from being an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, there *is* something called "thoughtful religion" and it is needed more today than ever. And though I expect I do not need to convince *you* of this, perhaps I do need to remind us of just how important thoughtful religion is, of the potential we have as inheritors of our Unitarian Universalist traditions of liberal religion, open-minded and open-hearted, in our troubled times to nurture the spirit and heal the world.

For example, one week ago today, as some of you no doubt are aware, someone scratched a swastika on the door of Temple Beth Sholom in Hull – our neighbors. My colleague and friend, Rabbi Ben Lefkowitz, and his congregants were of course outraged and saddened. My colleagues and friends in the Hingham Hull Religious Leaders Association were outraged and saddened. Our HHRL president on our behalf wrote a letter of support to the local papers.

Who would scratch such a message on a synagogue door, a place of learning and love? One person alone, troubled, anxious, vulnerable to messages of hate? Or some angry soul representing an organization rooted in an exclusivist, hateful, shameful, and thoughtless view of the world, of religion, of God?

We do not know.

But we *do* know that voices, hands, hearts, of inclusion, of love, of moral courage, of reasoned dialogue must be raised in opposition to such hate and in proclamation of a different view of the world.

Just as in response to the tragic shootings in the Knoxville UU congregation this past summer, we need not thoughtless revenge, but thoughtful voices, hands, hearts of love and moral courage proclaiming a different view of the world...

... a view echoing Channing, Ballou; echoing Rebecca Parker; echoing uncounted others... a view of life and of the world which includes rather than excludes, which proclaims kindness and love, which affirms that (in the words of the 16th century Transylvanian Unitarian Francis David), we do not need to think alike in order to love alike, and which further affirms that kindness and love, indeed reason itself, are nothing if we do not live them in the service of healing, in the service of peace, in the service (as Parker put it) of the flourishing of all life.

As Rebecca Parker concluded her sermon of 2006 – and as I will conclude today:

We affirm a covenant among all beings that we honor with our hearts, souls, mind and strength.

We will do everything in our power to assure that this covenant is not broken.

And we seek to connect our circle with other circles of life, to expand our circle into ever widening ripples of influence for good.

Thoughtful religion in every sense – guided by mind, centered in heart... we... and our world... need thoughtful religion.

So may it be.

Benediction

In the words of yet another 19th century spiritual forebear, the great abolitionist Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
Its temple, all space;
Its shrine, the good heart;
Its creed, all truth;
Its ritual, works of love;
Its profession of faith, divine living.

So may it be.