

The Pursuit of Happiness

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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I am going to ask you to do something out of the ordinary today; and that's to think and feel like an empathetic historian. When I was seventeen, and a first year university student, I encountered the opening line of L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, where Hartley stated, in words that have taken me a long time to appreciate: "The past is a foreign country; they did things differently there."

This quote has a lot to do with what I am going to say today. But first: though I'm a Canadian citizen, I am also aware of the fact that I'm a Yank—something you bring to my attention every once in awhile and it oft time occurs when, in jest, you make a comparison between *our* civic trinity of peace, order and good government and the US trinity of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The latter seems to be something of a joke: *we Canadians* are a polite, responsible folk, whereas those Yanks! My god! The pursuit of happiness? *Happiness?! Thank you very much!* South of the 49th parallel, they're addicted to immediate pleasures and stuff and they think they have a *right* to it. Infinite happiness and consumption, declared in their *Declaration of Independence*, as the goal of civic and moral goods onward and upward forever to utopia! Well that's not quite what's going on when Jefferson identified the pursuit of happiness as an unalienable right, whether people in the States know it or not. And this brings me back to the quote from *The Go-Between*. "The past is a foreign country; they did things differently there."

So join with me as we take a magical mystery tour back two centuries and more into the past—that foreign country where they did and thought things differently. There have been estimates that 85% of the European settlers in North America, up through the early decades of the 19th century, were Calvinist Christians—from Puritans and Congregationalists to Presbyterians, from Methodists to Anglicans even. As is the case with all religions, Calvinism is

a wide ranging set of beliefs and practices, and I don't want to make light of it or distort it beyond *all* recognition.

That said, at its heart is a formidable vision of the awesome majesty and judgment of a transcendent God and of humanity's innate depravity, its fallenness. While Jonathan Edwards, a Calvinist minister in 18th century New England, is renowned for his appreciation for nature and the complexity of his theological insights, he is justly known for a series of sermons he preached in the Connecticut River Valley in the 1740s. I'm going to share an account of it because it goes a long way to describe just how tightly wound up, anxious and widely distressed religious folk were in North America; it also helps to explain the revolt that took place that brought the pursuit of happiness from the margins into the very heart of the North American experience.

According to later eyewitness reports, the townspeople of Enfield, Connecticut, arrived one Sunday morning at the meetinghouse in 1741 in good spirits looking forward to hearing the renowned Rev. Edwards preach. The mood swiftly changed. In his steady, learned voice, Edwards began to detail the torments that awaited the congregation down beneath the brown earth of the banks of the Connecticut River—lions would devour the wicked, serpents would swallow sinners whole. And famously, he went on: God “holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect, over the fire....He abhors you and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns like fire...you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent.” He told them that it was no good trying to be good: damnation is the destiny of every soul “that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they may otherwise be.”

As he approached the finale of the sermon, Edwards made it all seem as real as tomorrow's breakfast: “And it would be a wonder,” he said, “if some that are now present should not be in hell in a very short time, even before this year is out. And it would be no wonder, if some persons that sit here now, in this meetinghouse, in health, quiet and secure, should be there [in hell] before tomorrow morning.”

However, according to a witness, Edwards closing words could hardly be heard above the “moaning and great crying out” that arose “throughout the whole house.” “What should I do to be saved,” the people screamed. “Oh, I am going to Hell!”

Edwards’ preaching, and that of his ministerial brethren delivered an astonishing rush of converts of all ages in what’s been called the First Great Awakening. It had, as well, a peculiar impact upon young children who attended services with their parents. According to one newspaper report: “The *terrible language*...frequently frights the *little children*, and sets them to screaming; and this frights their *tender mothers*, and sets them to screaming; and by degrees it spreads” out and infects the whole congregation.

You look at the printed sermons, at the private letters, memoirs and diary entries of plain folk in the early 18th and 19th centuries, and what you see across a wide swath of that landscape is a people in the grips of gnawing anxiety over their ultimate fate. For some, great joy broke into their lives as the result of a saving experience and the submission of their mind and will to the unfathomable majesty and justice of God. For others, it provoked an icy fury and total revolt.

“It would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all,” wrote Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, “than to blaspheme him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin.” The God of Edwards, fumed the Vermonter Ethan Allen, is “some inhuman, cruel, and destructive being who delighted in wo and pungent grief.” The doctor and revolutionary Thomas Young reminisced: “[at a young age] I became a very serious enquirer of what I should do to be saved...I experienced the blackness of darkness, misery and despair.....I never could reconcile this sate of feeling in a young boy’s heart with the idea of an all-wise and powerful Being.” At about seven or eight years old, confessed Thomas Paine, “after attending a sermon on the subject of ‘*The Redemption by the Death of the Son of God*,’ I went into the garden, and as I was going down the steps (for I perfectly recall the spot) I revolted at the recollection of what I had heard, and thought to myself that it was making God act like a passionate man that killed his son...and I was sure such a man would be hanged that did such a thing.”

Eighty years after Edwards' sermon, one mother in Palmyra, New York, turned away in unbearable grief when told by her minister that he could not perform a church funeral nor bury her saintly 23 year old son on church grounds. The young man hadn't had a saving experience, was not a member of the congregation, and with implacable logic, the minister suggested that the departed's eternal soul was in dire peril. That young dead man's younger brother, who couldn't find *himself* able to jump and shout with the rest at revival meetings, went on to create a religion (or so my wife has observed) to save his dead brother and to console his and countless other mothers from this landscape of anxiety, distress and grief. He audaciously created a religion that would save everybody and that dared to say that the whole purpose of life and being itself is *joy*. His name was Joseph Smith, and the religion he founded was the one I was born into sixty years ago.

Paradigms come to an end when a sufficiently critical mass of people start saying the logic, proofs and outcomes of the reigning wisdom fail the test of reason, observation and experience. And that's what began to happen to the grip of Calvinism in North America within a few short years of Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* sermon. The revolt began from two different camps: the first religious, the second politico-philosophical.

Charles Chauncey, the minister of First Church in Boston, started the pushback with a scathingly critical review in 1743 of the distress and break up of congregations and towns occasioned by the hellfire sermons and revivalist tactics among the Calvinist clergy; and then, for over twenty years leading up to his death, Chauncey worked on his magnum opus *The Salvation of All Men* the purpose of which, he wrote, was to show by scripture and reason that "the whole human race are considered...as made for *happiness*; and it finally fixes them in the everlasting enjoyment of it." Meanwhile, Chauncey's protégé, Rev. Jonathan Mayhew preached to a congregation that was becoming increasingly Unitarian under his influence, that Calvinism was "dishonourable to God and a libel on human nature." "Salvation," he said, "was *not* to be found in a *firm persuasion* that [some of us] are elected by God." Rather, it is to be found in what he

called “practical religion, the love of god, and a life of righteousness and charity.” That assertion led Calvinist ministers in Boston to brand Mayhew an “atheist in the pulpit.”

Chauncey, Mayhew and others who became early proponents of Unitarianism in North America in the latter decades of the 18th century were joined by other ministers and folk of whom we hear precious little—people who played an outsized role in the development of our denomination and its worldview—they’re called Universalists. Of 46 congregations and fellowships in the Canadian Unitarian Council, ten congregations, by their official name, acknowledge the influence and contribution of the *Universalist* movement to their own identity.

Brought by John Murray and his feminist wife Judith Sargant to North America in 1770, and then spread by itinerant preachers up and down the Eastern seaboard, throughout New England and into Upper Canada, the sum of the Universalist message was that all are destined to be saved. This was a welcome and liberating experience to thousands weighed heavily down by that anxiety over one’s own ultimate fate and that of one’s family and friends. It’s as though the Universalists were saying: imagine yourself an artist commissioned to paint a portrait of God and the fate of humanity—who would he or she be? A remote, implacable judge arrayed in black robes, or an infinitely compassionate parent. And what destiny awaited us? The mass of humanity thrust down to hell fire? Or all of us, ultimately being welcomed home?

“We believe in *One God*,” wrote Universalists gathered in 1790, who will “finally restore the whole human race to happiness.” “Our main object,” wrote Universalist minister Hosea Ballou in 1805, “in all we do, is happiness....What would induce us to form societies; to be at the expense of governments; to acquire knowledge, to learn the sciences, or till the earth” if not to be happy? And he went on to say: there is a “law that exists in the mind, which law is the imperfect knowledge we have of the moral good,” and the best we can do is come to an understanding of that law. The problem is deciding which actions do in fact lead to true happiness and then acting according to that understanding.

Do you remember the Universalist Maria Cook from New York State who we brought back from the dead in the “Encountering our Ancestors” service? Maria was the first woman in

North America commissioned to travel and preach publicly; the glad tidings of universal salvation, spiritual democracy and that the main object in all we do is happiness was her message. In 1811, she was the most popular evangelist in New York State, until one day in Cooperstown she was hauled off the street and jailed accused of being both mad and a vagrant. What she was truly guilty of, however, was standing foursquare against Calvinist orthodoxy, and routing ministers in public debates because people embraced her message of universal salvation and happiness—a message that gladdened their souls like rain on drought stricken, barren earth.

The pursuit of happiness? The leading Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing said that there is “in all human beings an insatiable desire for happiness” and called it a “central motive principle in the human soul.” “Our main object in all we do is happiness,” wrote Hosea Ballou. “What else would induce us to form societies,” if not for this end?

Note the language, the terms being used in all of this by Unitarians and Universalists in the late 1700 and early 1800s: “a central motive principle,” says Channing; “the whole human race is made for happiness,” wrote Chauncey; “a law exists in the mind...a knowledge for the moral good...and that we can come to an understanding of that law,” asserted Hosea Ballou; which, Channing concluded, tells us that the “individual is a living part of the infinite universe preserved and perfected by the care of its parts.... The general good is bound up in the individual good and its happiness. I belong to this great extended family; I am bound to it by vital bonds.”

This language, these terms, were taken by our ancestors straight from the political philosophy being worked out in the great universities of Scotland and the Continent, and from the public debates roiling North America over sovereignty, good government, and human rights. This is what liberal religion does—it’s our curse and blessing. We feel compelled to correlate the best, most provocative thought from the humanities, sciences, arts and culture with our opinions and beliefs and then run all received traditions, teachings and practices through that gauntlet. Deference to dogma won’t do; scripture alone is not enough; subservience to masters puts us in revolt.

What our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors were doing was correlating their beliefs and understanding of scripture and practice with contemporary sciences and secular thought. In a world of 18th century physics, “the *pursuit* of happiness” was understood, in the words of Peter Paxton, “as inseparable from the nature of man as is the tendency of unthinking matter toward its own center.” We’re drawn toward happiness, we pursue it, as Newton’s apple falls earthward. “It is a constant determination of human nature,” wrote Laurence Sterne. We follow after happiness, said Thomas Jefferson, “by a uniform necessity of nature;” something as regular as a magnetic needle’s turn to the North. This is a law that is normative, one that we can steer by. Gravity rules imperious, whether we pay attention to it or not; but *knowledge* of that law can give us *power* to alter things—whether it’s lofting a rocket on a ten year journey to an asteroid, or asserting our right to the pursuit of happiness. If the fall of that apple, if our natural desire and pursuit for happiness, is obstructed by some arbitrary barrier, then we have the right to remove that obstacle, knowing this is consonant with the very order of nature.

“The several rights of mankind,” wrote the Scots philosopher Frances Hutcheson, “are made known by their...*natural* desires *pursuing* such things as tend to the good of each individual” and to society. Those “several rights are...first made known,” he continued, “by the natural feelings of [our] hearts.” “The natural feelings of [our] hearts.” Here I want to start wrapping things up.

What Hutcheson and his colleagues at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow—Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, David Hume, Adam Smith—and before them, reaching back to John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, Giordano Bruno and the revival in Europe of the ancient philosophy of Epicureanism—what they achieved was to powerfully establish the insight that “happiness in this life...is everything;” and that its “surest path is a life of ordinary virtue.” The 18th century Unitarian Jonathan Mayhew called it “practical religion...a life of righteousness and charity.”

“Look into the original frame of our temper,” wrote Adam Ferguson, and what you’ll find is that we possess an innate moral sentiment: “We feel,” he said, “a [natural] desire for another’s

happiness or good.” “The happiness of mankind, as well as all other creatures,” wrote Adam Smith,” seems to have been the original purpose intended by Nature that brought them into existence.” And “the surest way to promote private happiness,” said Hutcheson and his philosophical and political colleagues, “is to do publicly useful actions.”

Together, these philosophers were saying that true happiness is found in society, and that our pursuit of it, if our nature is not obstructed, will lead us to desire the greatest happiness for others. And what is true for the individual—our own happiness and sense of purpose arising from desiring the same for others and pursuing it in “publicly useful actions”—is also true of our associations and of the state. In the words of Adam Smith: “all constitutions of government...are valued only in proportion as they tend to promote the happiness of those who live under them.” And on these facts of human nature, our associations and governments are to be established, judged, altered or abolished.

The first waves of European settlers in North America may have brought Calvinism with them as their principal religious and moral baggage; and with it built an emotional landscape haunted by anxiety, distress and a lot of despair over our ultimate fate. But that monopoly was not to last. In the hands of our Universalist and Unitarians ancestors, the scriptures they read, the emotions they felt, the political philosophies they studied *altogether* combined to enable them to bring about a great social, cultural, and religious reformation. They proposed and achieved a heretical displacement of authority and dogma that had filled countless people with anxiety and despair by offering an alternative message of happiness and hope in this life as well as the next. They rejected a distressing dogma that decreed only an elect few would enjoy eternal bliss while the rest of us were all sent packing for hell by offering a message of universal love and salvation.

For them, the pursuit of happiness was not some vague, materialistic, wish-fulfillment dream, but a natural law, a natural right, an original blessing that endows us all. “The whole human race is made for happiness,” they proclaimed. “Give them, not hell, but hope and courage,” John Murray told a small band of Universalist ministers. “Do not push them deeper

into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.” That vanguard, heretical belief went on to change the face of religion on this continent.

It was the greatest achievement, the best thing the ancestors of our religion tradition ever did. It’s a faith we have inherited, the larger hope we share. May we continue to be worthy of it.

(for the account of Edwards and the response it provoked, See Matthew Stewart, *Nature’s God: the Heretical Origins of the American Republic*, pp. 49-61; on John Murray, Hosea Ballou and the Universalists see Charles Howe, *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*, pp. 2-25; on the Scots and philosophy see Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence*, chapters 13, 17, 18; on the Epicurean revival in philosophy see Stewart, *Nature’s God...*, chapter 3)