

The Journey of Belief

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Do you recall Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, the one that starts: "How do I love thee?"—do you remember what follows? "Let me count the ways." When I was a kid, *that's* where I tuned out; it sounded like accountancy—the very opposite of romantic love, no? But let's think about it. Browning's saying that she's already deeply in love with someone—a profoundly passionate experience has already taken place. Now, on reflection, she wants to understand and share it because it's become the very center and purpose of her life. Feelings first; reasoning second. I think she also wants us, the reader, to desire and search for this kind of feeling and way of being in the world. Having experienced love as something that transformed her life and gives it meaning—upon reflection, she's telling us it's something to want, to reckon with and to share as a gift to others.

I think theology is a lot like this—someone has a direct encounter with what we call "that transcending Mystery and Wonder"—a sacred, provocative, encompassing otherness; the experience brings a blessing—a sense of meaning and purpose; it also brings a judgment or challenge—a demanding kind of feeling that now's the time to get our act together. How do I or we know this? "*Let me count the ways*"—that's theology, the work it has to perform.

Theology begins with our unusual experiences of transcendence—the kinds where nature and the birth of a child fill us with awe, the dread-filled kinds at times of pain and loss; the exhilarating kinds when struck by love and insight; the kinds where, in "confronting powers and structures of evil," the voice and promptings of conscience cannot be silenced. Awe, dread, pain, love, insight, conscience—a door opens and we experience something greater than ourselves—

this is where theology begins; what comes next is a description of that mysterious encounter and its consequences, both personal and social.

First the ecstasy, *then* the laundry—isn't that how it goes? Theology is the laundry service for transcendence; and as we learned recently in Joan Armstrong's memorial service, you don't just hang up laundry any old way—there's an *art* to it: first the pants, in descending order according to size, then socks by pairs and colour, and so on. Same with theology—which is the thoughtful expression of a person's deepest beliefs about reality and the meaning and purpose of our lives.

A word about belief: I enjoyed finding out that belief can mean “to hold dear,” and that part of the word *lief* means to “to desire, to love that which pleases.” After we've secured a roof over our heads, food on the table, and good company to share them with, it's pleasing and desirable to discover and enjoy with mind and heart what we truly believe, and how those beliefs give our lives purpose, meaning, challenges and achievement; you could even call it a kind of love.

From October last year to mid April, members of this congregation joined with me twice a month to read and discuss how Unitarians have done theology. It was quite a journey! We ranged from European authors in the 16th-18th centuries bent on accurate interpretation of the Bible and critical examination of Christian history and practice, and then to North America from the early 1800s to the present where women and men created the Transcendentalist movement and later used discoveries in biological and social sciences, cosmology and the humanities, as well as lived religious experience, to reconfigure and recommend Unitarianism as a global faith.

In the time remaining, I'll present what I think were distinctive ideas and developments in the Unitarian theologies we read, and then I will conclude with some statements about what I

think we believe and affirm in common—that is, what we find pleasing and desirable in our religion that’s worthy of our loyalty and love as Unitarians. First, I want to start with a story.

In December 1551, Pietro Manelfi betrayed to the Inquisition scores of women and men who had been meeting in secret religious groups for at least two years in and around Venice. These people, he claimed, taught one another outside the church and held dangerously seditious and heretical beliefs. In particular, they believed that magistrates had become enemies of god, that church and state should be separate, and that “our Lord Christ is not God conceived by the Holy Spirit but is only a man born from human seed, though filled with the virtues of God.” A drag net swiftly followed, two dozen people were picked up by the authorities; but most eluded arrest and swiftly fled the region.

In the Inquisition court cases that followed, those on trial courageously described and defended their beliefs to the astonished judges: they affirmed that Christ was not God, but a man conceived by Joseph and Mary, who had other sons and daughters; that the only devil is perverted human knowledge and power, and that no hell exists. Jesus was a great moral teacher, they asserted, who they revered; the core of his ethical message was contained in the Sermon on the Mount, and that his death was a sign of God’s love, not a sacrifice for us, nor was he a mediator between us and God. They placed their hopes for salvation not in the grace alone of God, but in their own efforts to fulfill what they saw as the ethical commands of Christianity. Before the lords of the court, one of the accused explained that their lives were based above all on biblical precepts: “We do not have any other decree or writing but the New Testament...our life is not to take things that belong to others and we are to help everyone....We need to love one another and should never do to others things we would not wish done to ourselves.” (see John Martin,

Venice’s Hidden Enemies: Italian Heretics in a Renaissance City, pp 99-112.)

I tell this story because it shows what would be the essential outlook, beliefs and practices of women and men who came to call themselves Unitarians. (** a further note at the end)

For the next three hundred years, Unitarians created a progressive, biblically focused, ethically oriented Christian movement. They esteemed our God-given gifts of reason, conscience and reverence. They applied these powers in a systematic, critical reading of the Bible, church history and dogma which produced a revolutionary theology and a mythic retelling of the Christian story. Their understanding of the Bible, informed by knowledge of its original languages and close, rational reading of it, led them to reject the doctrine of the Trinity—it's just not there in the text—and to assert there is only one God who, though ultimately mysterious and beyond the capacities of reason to fully comprehend, could be “known” and revered in the person of a fully human Jesus, esteemed by these Unitarians as *the* pre-eminent teacher and example of a rich and moral life. They claimed that Jesus didn't die for our sins; rather, each of us, guided by conscience and reason, were responsible for the outcome of our own lives. Theirs was an essentially optimistic view of human and divine nature; we could enjoy a fulfilling moral and spiritual life here on earth by overcoming the sinful effects of ignorance through education and moral reform of the self and society. How did they know this to be true?—by trusting in the authority of the Bible read in the light of reason, conscience and experience—those, not the authority of priests, popes, and time-worn dogmas—were the bedrock of their theology and practice.

[[Two more things stand out, so far, in our story—history and science. To put it briefly, in the words of Joseph Priestley, “Historical argument leads me to think it probable that the Christian church was Unitarian in its very early period.” That is, Unitarians rewrote Christian history with them and their beliefs as the original script and cast of characters. Christianity had fallen away from first truths; Unitarians believed it was their task to restore the original beliefs and practices of Christianity to their proper place and function. This re-writing of the

Christian story became an essential part of the Unitarian mythos—our self understanding—and it helps explain the infectious and enduring confidence and courage of those Unitarians in the face of persecution from both church and state right on down to the early decades of the 19th century.

And one word about science—I just didn't see Unitarians struggling with the findings of science the way many other Western religions have. Let me quote Theodore Parker here: "It is only gradually that we approach to the true system of nature by observation and reasoning, and work out our philosophy and theology by the toil of the brain." The key words are approach, nature and observation and reason. Whether it was the Copernican or Darwinian or other advances in the sciences, Unitarians embraced their findings as means to better understand the nature of Nature itself as a unitary whole—one that included us and our true place within it.]]

In summing up this three hundred year period in our history, imagine this picture: there is an encompassing framework—the outer margins of the frame are rather blurry and indistinct—there's definitely a Mystery beyond. The inner margins are clearly defined—within the frame are the cosmos and our world. At the centre of the picture: a Bible, the lamp of reason, and a portrait of a very human Jesus. The canvas is both brightly and darkly lit, signifying the persecution and prejudice our Unitarian ancestors suffered and their ultimate confidence in the light of truths revealed in the Bible, and the light of reason and conscience. There is also a hand outstretched, symbolic of their commitment to religious tolerance, or in the words of the Racovian Catechism: "Let every person enjoy the freedom of his own judgment in religion...Let us *also* exhibit *our* views of divine things, without injuring or slandering others."

Next to that picture we now place another. The scene changes to North America where, between 1820 and 50, a new Unitarian theology rises alongside the old. Though still highly controversial and seen as heretical by mainstream Christianity both Catholic and Protestant, persecution of Unitarians had abated, ministers and congregations were going public, and our scholarship flourished. That's the good news, and so was the powerful summing up of those

three hundred years of progressive Unitarian thinking by people like William Ellery Channing in his 1819 “Jared Sparks Ordination Sermon.”

[[Channing used this sermon to define what Unitarians believed. He did this first, in a withering attack on the whole spectrum of orthodox Calvinism, which was by far the most powerful religious and cultural force in North America, and then by stating Unitarian first principles on scripture, the moral example of a human Jesus and of our innate moral capacity for virtue and the good.]] I cannot overemphasize how liberating this message was. Psychologically, countless people at that time suffered from the thrall of a punishing vision of a wrathful, omnipotent, supernatural God who pre-destined and consigned most of humanity to hell. You didn’t know yourself, no matter how good you were or aspired to be, whether you were destined for woe or blessedness. The Unitarian and Universalist message of a loving god, the non-existence of eternal hellfire and of our natural capacity for virtue were perhaps the most important contributions our religion ever made. I think we take it for granted now, or see it as a piece of ancient history, but we shouldn’t, believe me.

Paradoxically, within a generation, younger ministers and laity, people like Emerson, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller and others turned that outward focused critical eye inward. They accused the older generation of Unitarians of having created a “corpse cold religion” where the living well of the spirit and revelation had run dry. The older generations, they asserted, were trapped in antiquated theories of human nature, obsessed with pointless interpretations of the Bible, tone deaf to rising economic distress, the blight of industrialization, the subjugation of women and the curse of slavery.

Not calculating reason, not the Bible and its remote God, not even the Jesus of the Church—these could not serve as living, authoritative sources for a transformative spiritual and ethical life. Instead, inspired by a new wave of philosophical Romanticism from Europe, these Transcendentalists, as they came to be called, claimed that immediate experience: flashes of

insight, strong emotions, and promptings of conscience—these are where we experience the divine and its influence. The divine is not out there, it's here in our whole being, and present in the world, including nature; and all the great things in religion and spirituality didn't take place just in the 1st or 16th century, they're happening here and now in our midst, or would, if you'd only get out of the way or had the sense to experience it as well. And if it happens to us, if intuition and conscience are common human endowments, then what is true for us is and has been true for the whole human family. It was here, beginning in the 1830s and 40s, that these Unitarians began to turn seriously for the first time to religious texts and traditions of world religions as credible, potentially inspiring sources for religious insight and wisdom.

Finally, Transcendentalists claimed that the immediate awareness of moral knowledge disclosed by the active faculties of the mind compel us to strive, in this life, to realize the kingdom of virtue and the good—the Kingdom of God. Slavery, oppression, barriers to the equality of women, the plight of the poor, of prisoners, and people left to rot in mental institutions—all of these were repugnant to moral insight and achieving “the reign of justice.” And so this generation of Unitarians turned to advocacy for social justice, human rights and began, in the writings of Thoreau, to lay the groundwork for environmentalism.

The Civil War in the States cut a gash in that nation's psyche, and definitely weakened Unitarianism for generations. Something like that would happen to Canadian and British Unitarians during and after the Great War. What was left of Transcendentalism? Its strength was its weakness. Self realization and the primacy of immediate experience are well and necessary, but it comes at a high price. The passing on of traditional knowledge and strengthening institutions and community suffer. As well, high esteem for the potentiality of the self got conflated with a popular misunderstanding of Darwin—one that believed in the survival of the

fittest, and that evolution was a universal law of progress; not so. But that didn't keep Samuel Freeman Clarke from proclaiming that one of the five principles of Unitarianism was the "progress of mankind onward and upward forever."

Second picture: vegetation and tendrils entwine the frame. The Bible and Jesus have moved to the margins and begin to fade. At the center, the lamp of reason still burns, but beside it now, two distinct individuals—a man and woman—have stepped to the foreground, and an oversized heart glows brightly within them: symbolic of the Transcendentalist turn to the self, and its active, feeling intuitive powers as THE source of spiritual authority and the site for religious experience. Next to them is an escalator promising limitless progress. At their feet lie broken chains, symbolic of their vision of social justice. At the margins symbols of world religions appear.

Third and last picture: we're still here and moving through the 20th century up to the present. We're in the home stretch. What stands out are the various ways Unitarians have registered and tried to thoughtfully come to grips with the impacts of World Wars, movements for liberation and inclusion, the rise of an environmental consciousness, the threats and promises of globalization, and awesome discoveries about infinitesimal and infinite scales of the subatomic and cosmic realms. What also stands out is our struggle to define and claim a shared religious identity. In view of the time, I'm going to walk through this very briskly.

First, the implications of Darwinian theory, the new cosmology and quantum physical processes altogether have had a big impact on Unitarian theology. They have been combined in a provisional unitary vision of existence that theologians like Charles Hartshorne call "process theology." In this visionary thought—evolution, astronomy and subatomic physics suggest that all things—from the smallest particles to the largest structures in the cosmos—are "social,"

interrelated, and interdependent all the way down and out. Novelty, “feeling” and relation are real and constitutive facts of Nature, with a capital N. And when we stand back and look at the whole swirling dance of it, we can see that there is a process at work moving from simplicity to complexity, from the mute to the communicative; and, I might add, there is something significant about human consciousness that can map this out and essay to understand and marvel at it.

Second, the shocks of world wars, economic depression, and the rise of movements for liberation caught Unitarians woefully unprepared. Our baggy, optimistic belief in the inevitability of progress, coupled with a navel gazing preoccupation with individual self-actualization rendered us nearly bereft of effective resources to stand in solidarity with others against political and religious fascism. James Luther Adams ruthlessly dissected this weakness of ours, and called for an urgent, prophetic re-commitment to the power of organization and the organization of power on behalf of “truth, beauty and goodness.” This prophetic re-positioning would change us as well and open us up to undreamt of inclusiveness within our own congregations and movement.

Henry Nelson Wieman called this “creative interchange”—a place and a process where the depths of Being can be accessed and revealed. You want to experience truly sacred moments of insight and awe where meaning, purpose and power are disclosed?—you don’t have to go to the ends of the earth—associate with one another, serve and learn together. For Wieman, this is where we can encounter the divine, and it’s just down the street and can happened between you and me.

In the midst of this marveling at process, the urgent calls to organize, the assurance of creativity and connection, there must also be a place for grief and loss. Rebecca Parker reminds us through powerfully personal stories and prose that in response to abuse and violence,

suffering and mourning are also part of the human endowment. What our religion needs today is a more patient willingness to honestly abide with self and each other in times of emotional and mental distress, and thus abjure the cult of false comfort, uplift and efficiency.

“The religious life lives in tension between ecstasy and melancholy,” writes Robert Corrington. There may be process at work in the heart of things, but there are no guarantees; and will there ever be a time, now or at the end of days, when all the tears are dried?

This last picture is not finished, how could it be? Even now we are adding our own brushstrokes of colour, and light and shade to it. But let’s stand back for a parting look. The frame has disappeared. It’s difficult to survey the whole thing. In its place is a shimmering, swirling web, tattered and broken here and there, but mostly intact and connecting innumerable elements and occasions in something that may look like a structure, a process. The two people, man and woman of the second picture have been joined by a diverse crew, young old, bent, straight, queer, all the colours, animals, the whole living, teeming, blooming power and glory of it all...

I think the escalator’s gone. As for the other symbols—lamps, broken chains, face of Jesus, religious icons of world religions—they are distributed throughout the web, some in the foreground, some in the distance, though none is absolutely fixed in place: each may approach and recede as needed in due time.

Closing words: stepping back, looking at the words, the stories, the pictures—is it still possible to say something about what I think we believe and affirm in common—that is, what we find pleasing and desirable in our religion that’s worthy of our loyalty and love as Unitarians? I said I would.

- We believe in the unity of all things—connected and animated by the laws and power of Nature. (If someone wants to call that God, don't have a cow, they're probably not talking about a white guy with a beard, sitting on a throne somewhere pulling the strings.)
- We believe in original goodness; this is our one and precious life and planet, it can be a hell or heaven for us and others—it's up to us, the outcome is not guaranteed.
- We believe that people should be free to choose and deepen their beliefs according to reason and the dictates of conscience.
- We believe that revelation still happens and will continue to take place—especially when we prepare for it, encourage it, and welcome it. (Yes, and that includes Jesus and the prophets and teachers of other faiths.)
- We believe that something sacred happens when we gather in worship, learning, building our congregations and fellowshiping with one another; this is a treasure we should value, nurture and pass along to future generations in better shape than we received it.
- We believe in love—it's more important than doctrine, more important than being right.

I want to thank my fellow travelers, the members of the theologies class, for frequently lighting the way forward when Epperson went down the wrong path or when it became too dark for any of us alone to see clearly.

** By the 1550s a great transformation had taken place in Europe; first, a revolution in ideas that we call the Renaissance encouraged people to return to the classic sources of European civilization—to the writing and thinking of ancient Greece and Rome, and to the Bible itself. Second, that ideal and practice was democratized and spread widely because of the technological revolution of the printing press that mass produced affordable editions of recently translated Bibles and the classical texts of antiquity. And finally, when people actually read the Bible and other classics, they discovered a very different religion and society than the one they and their

ancestors had known through the Middle Ages; and it filled them disgust and a profound, world-changing outlook and hope.

What they read and talked about convinced them that church and state had become utterly corrupt, a betrayal of the ideals, institutions and beliefs of an earlier better, age; and they set about the enormous, dangerous task of overhauling religion and society—it's what we call the Reformation and the rise of nation states. Unitarians were the most radical of the reformers, as we saw in that story of the anti-trinitarians betrayed to the Inquisition in Venice.