

A Curious Faith©

A sermon offered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

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It's happened to you too. If it hasn't happened to you already, it will. You're at a cocktail party or you're sitting next to someone on a plane and you are chit chatting and the topic of church may come up. Maybe you slip and say that you attend the Unitarian Universalist Church of such and such and the person has that quizzical look on their face and everything slows down as they ask you the question you are dreading to hear: "*Unitarian Universalism...what is that...and then...*" *what is it that ya'll believe?*" This is the moment when you get to testify to how important this faith and this church has been to you. This is the moment when you get to shine and share and maybe, if it feels right, to invite this person to come to this amazing place where you've found meaning and purpose and friends and fun and a place for kids..and...the words get stuck in your throat and you find yourself something like: "it's a place where you can believe anything you want..." Oh no. You say to yourself. That's not true. So you try again "it's a church where we all have different beliefs, but we all try to get along." That's getting closer, but it's not quite there yet either. As you struggle to find a way to describe Unitarian Universalism in one minute or less, the moment passes, the conversation shifts and the person next to you doesn't really have a very good idea about this complex and curious faith of ours.

If this has ever happened to you, believe me, you are not alone. We all know both the promise and perils of a single phrase. One is to say "I'm a Christian because Jesus died for my sins." There's a lot packed into that little phrase. I'm a Jew because my family is Jewish and I believe in, at

most, One God. Islam: There is no God but God and Mohammed is his Messenger." But when asked to describe Unitarian Universalism, we often stumble because Unitarian Universalism is not a monolithic faith. How do we capture the many nuances of this faith? There are many aspects of Unitarian Universalism which have changed since it was first defined, 200 years ago on this very day, in what is now the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore, in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. William Ellery Channing. Some of you will be attending a special service this afternoon at the church in Baltimore, commemorating this historic event; and if so, you'll hear more from the very fine preacher Fred Wooden. But, there's a lot happening this afternoon, so in case you don't make it, I thought I'd share with you some of the insights from that sermon, which is considered a watershed moment in Unitarian Universalist history. Although Channing's concerns from the 19th century may not seem all that relevant for contemporary Unitarian Universalism today, I also believe that as a faith we too, are at a watershed moment. Our question will be "how do we wish to respond to the challenges of OUR times?"

But, before we can look ahead we have to look back. Let me set the stage for you. Around New England, around 1812, a theological storm was brewing, between the Calvinists and the liberal Christians, who were simply referred to as non-Trinitarians. William Ellery Channing was called a liberal by Thomas Belsham, who wrote a chapter about a new and dangerous American strain of religion which he sneeringly called "Unitarianism." Belsham, and others like him were deeply

concerned about this new doctrine being preached; this liberal optimistic philosophy that challenged core doctrines like a belief in the Trinity, a reasoned approach to the Bible, and most importantly, universal salvation because of the infinite capacity for God's love and mercy.

Jared Sparks was a newly minted minister and he asked his mentor, Rev. Channing, to deliver the ordination sermon. Back then, ordination sermons were an opportunity to articulate important, theological truths. Channing saw this an opportunity to genteelly thumb his nose at the Calvinist critics by embracing the very term that was used as an epithet – "Unitarianism."

So what did he say that was so damaging to the Calvinists and the fundamentalists of his day? For one thing, he encouraged the use of reason. He wrote "we object strongly to the contemptuous manner in which human reason is often spoken of by our adversaries, because it leads, we believe to universal skepticism."

Channing believe that God intended us to actively exercise our intellectual abilities and not to swallow faith whole, but to accept it as it was revealed to us. With this in mind, God is not this stern authoritarian, but as the ultimate "wise teacher," who, like any wise teacher, delights in the expanding capacities of his or her students, not in "perplexing them with what is unintelligible . . . distressing them with apparent contradictions . . . [and] filling them with a skeptical distrust of their own powers."

This first point is one of the reasons I became a Unitarian Universalist in the first place. When I first started attending a Unitarian Universalist Church as a purple haired punk rocking college student in Kent, OH, I didn't understand that that tiny congregation would not only welcome but embrace my doubts. I don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus! I announced on Easter

Sunday. "That's interesting," they said, "neither do we!" "I don't think God would damn anyone to hell" I said during their version of Joys and Concerns. "Nope, neither do we."

And neither did Channing. Channing akes a persuasive argument for what he called the moral perfection of God. By this, he said – as I've heard many contemporary UU's say, we can't believe in a God who would support original sin or eternal suffering. That is a God who is morally bankrupt. "*We cannot bow before a being, however great and powerful, who governs tyrannically* " Channing writes.

We object," Channing says, speaking for his liberal community, to a God who is punitive, who aims to trick and confuse His/Her creatures, who is unworthy of love and trust."

This is a 180 position from the Calvinists who were deeply committed to the idea of predestination and election; that is, some are saved and others damned. The refutation of this belief is often attributed to the 2nd part of our name – Universalism – and while that's true, it's still an important thread in Unitarianism as well. The principles we refer to are a direct link to this core belief – that there is no individual salvation or damnation in this life or in the hereafter. We must be the saviors – and we are also the ones who damn others or the planet to destruction According to Channing, it's not God's fault or God's plan.

Although many religious people today – including evangelical Christians – no longer believe in a damning hell-based theology, the ones that do have exacted enormous harm, even to this day. I can bet after this sermon, some of you will want to share your own experiences of how living in fear of an angry and judgmental God shaped your attitude about religion. Certainly, this is true for transgender and genderqueer persons, as well as

people of color, for whom the Bible as the Word of God has been used as justification for enslavement.

The key points of Channing's 90 minute Baltimore sermon was: ***the unity of god, the humanity as opposed to the pure divinity of Jesus, the moral perfection of God, the fact that Jesus came to save us not by blood sacrifice but by moral example and that religious virtues had their foundation in the moral conscience of ordinary human beings.*** This sounds like pretty ordinary doctrine to us today, but for 1819, this was radical, soul-saving or soul damning stuff. The first run of 2,000 copies sold out quickly and had to be reprinted several. This sermon compelled the beginning of the American Unitarian Association and became the defining understanding of liberal Unitarianism until the mid to late 19th and early 20th century.

William Ellery Channing was preaching to people for whom reading and interpreting the Bible by using reason was cutting edge for his day. It attracted those persons who felt marginalized by their beliefs. That is still true today. Humanists and atheists are delighted to find a community but feel threatened by what they see as a creeping Christianity or sneaking spirituality into services. The mystics among us are exhausted by having to explain their beliefs to those who wish to be theological tourists. People of color are tired of having people automatically assume a Christian orientation; and, contrarily are frustrated when they feel they *can't* bring Jesus into a UU church. These were the debates that have shaded 20th and 21st century Unitarian Universalism.

Somewhere around the mid to late 20th century, Unitarian Universalism began to figure out that the humanist-theist debates are – or should be dead. We realized, we need to move beyond the

binary of good/bad; black/white; humanist-theist because it does not serve us or our faith well.

Which brings us back to that party or that airplane. Remember? Remember the casual question: “*So – what do ya'll believe?*” Even if you could remember the main points of Channing's Baltimore sermon it wouldn't be all that helpful because these are not live issues for us anymore. If I polled you right now and asked who really cares about the unity or moral perfection of God or the humanity vs divinity of Jesus – I doubt if there would be a strong show of support. And, honestly, neither do a lot of the *nones* – the 27% of the American population who define themselves as spiritual but not religious and who do not attend church. That's up from 19% in 2012. This increase stretches across demographics too; occurring in women, men, whites, blacks, Hispanics, Democrats and Republicans in every age and at every education level. Despite saying they are not religious, more than half, 54% say spirituality is important to them.

The *nones* are in fact looking for a place to explore their spiritual life – but they are not showing up at church. But who are these folks? There are five main categories and they may surprise you. The first is the *less educated*, almost 3 in 10 of those people with less than a high school diploma say they never attend church. The second group are those who self-identify as working-class Americans. Their spiritual needs are not being met in the workplace, their families or in evangelical or conservative churches. 26% of the working class are unchurched. The third group - unmarried people are more likely to never attend church. Why? Perhaps because church hasn't done a very good of attending to the needs of single people. Fourth group – those who identify as politically independent. Although many UU's lean towards one party; there are many who would probably land in the independent camp if a viable candidate emerged. And finally, the fifth group is Generation

Z – those born between the mid-1990's and the early 2000's who is the youngest and the largest generational cohort on the planet. This means in coming years they will not simply influence culture, but they *will be* culture. For those between the ages of 18-29, 39% would place themselves in the “nonés” – or the spiritual, but religious unaffiliated category.

These five categories are ones which most Unitarian Universalists don't generally market to. We think our market is the NPR listener, the symphony goer. Folks – that's me! I'm that person. But I already found a church – thirty years ago. And yet, I believe our core message – that all are worthy, and all are welcome; and that we are *called to love the hell out of this world* is a message that anyone of those five groups can relate to. The less educated, the less influential, those who are unmarried, the political independents, the next generation - all persons who are also spiritual, but not religious, who are seeking a home for their children and to reflect on the nagging questions which trouble us all; what does it mean to be born? What does it mean to die? What happens in between? We are proud of our learn-ed clergy and learned faith – and while I love a good intellectual argument as much as the next person, that is not what will sustain us into the 21st century.

At the end of the ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks, Channing charged Sparks with these words, he said “*you will remember, that the good practice is the end of preaching, and will labor to make your people holy livers – rather than skillful disputants.*” Using the archaic language of the 19th century, Channing preached a prescient word that rings through time to us today. “Good practice” he said is the end of preaching; which mean our words are hollow if we do not put them into practice.

One of my colleagues, the Reverend Rob Eller-Isaacs, keeps preaching the same thing things about the practice of church. I hold this advice close

for myself and congregations I serve as well. Eller-Isaacs mantra is: Develop a consistent, sustained personal spiritual practice. As a result of this practice, you develop skills in small group intimacy that allows you to go deep quickly, even with strangers, and then you put the compassion that arises from those disciplines to work in the world. This is why we have covenant groups at UUCA. This is why leaders like Linda Mundy and others of our community based organizing group ACT continues to insist on the power of one-to-ones, because when you know someone's story you cannot “other” another. And this is why Rev. John keeps preaching about emotional literacy; because it's not enough to simply be in a group; what we're trying to do here is to grow our souls to expand and enlarge our capacity for compassion and in so doing – change the world.

Channing was calling us to do is to make of this life a holy endeavor. It matters not the means by which you do that, assuming those means are based on ethical and moral guidelines. But it matters how you live your life. It matters what goes on inside your head. It matters how generous of spirit you can be with those whom you don't like or disagree. It matters how you live your life because your children and their friends are watching and learning and imitating.

Channing was saying “it's your *life people* – it's how you live your life that matters, not how well you can argue with one another.” And for church – and for all those spiritual but not religious folks who never heard of William Ellery Channing and are unlikely to care, what matters is something very much more important.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism has a life-saving message. I believe this because it saved my life when I was a 20-year-old college student wandering in the wilderness. Rev. John has testified about how it saved his, as his Leika and as has Josh. What makes us curious to the rest of the

world – our rebelliousness against dogma is the same thing that can make us attractive to a new generation of seekers. (One God – Nobody left Behind. Freedom, Reason, Acceptance; Seekers of truth from a variety of sources; Liberal Protestant Denomination; One church, many paths.)

Here's the rub though. Those new generation of seekers will be looking at doing church very differently than what any of us have done before. They will have different needs and demands and hopes and dreams for the church. The question for us – those of us who are institutionalists – is – will we listen? Can we adapt? Can we imagine a Unitarian Universalism that can be both inclusive of who we are now – and yet encouraging of that which we may become? Let me give you an example.

A couple of weeks ago I visited a church that I had not been to in twenty years. When I arrived, I was delighted to be greeted by someone I knew from those days. The minister had changed; in fact, they had had several ministers by that time, but the order of service was pretty much the same, as was the music. I noticed they had re-arranged the chairs, and I liked the old way better to tell you the truth. They sang hymns that I knew. I found that comforting. I was happy to note that the ritual that was so important to me twenty years ago was still done the same way. I left the service feeling satisfied, but something was bugging me. “How was the service?” my husband asked when I got home. “It was just great! Exactly like I remember.” And then I realized – that was it. That was the problem. It was exactly like the service I

remembered and liked and felt comfortable with twenty years ago.

I'm not the same person I was twenty years ago. And neither are you. And neither is this faith. Two hundred years ago I can bet there were no people of color listening to Dr. Channing's sermon as slavery would not be abolished in Maryland until 1864. Two hundred years ago I would never have been permitted to stand before this congregation and be paid to preach. Today's Unitarian Universalism and the Unitarian Universalism of the next 200 years will look very different. We are entering a new era of church that no one quite knows what will happen next.

It might mean that the traditional sermon and service as we've known it will need to radically adapt itself to those for whom worship looks and feels very different. I don't know what it will look like – but I do know that I want this faith to continue, because it's given me so much – and I suspect that's true for you as well.

I beg you—I implore you – to embrace the changes that new people with different needs will bring even if it requires you to sacrifice some of your own personal comfort. Someone did that for me, long ago, when I was a purple haired punk rocker from Kent Ohio flinging myself at the Unitarian Universalist church week after week. Those dear long-time members made a way for me to find the faith that would save my life. Wouldn't it be a powerful testimony for the future of this faith – and of this congregation, if we did the same?