

SPECTRUM OR PENDULUM?
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
April 4, 2004

Contemplation

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.

As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.

I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events that the will I call mine.

Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love. (from "The Oversoul," by Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Reading

If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation. If you are black and I am white, it will not matter.

If you are female and I am male, it will not matter.

If you are older and I am younger, it will not matter.

If you are progressive and I am conservative, it will not matter.

If you are straight and I am gay, it will not matter.

If you are Christian and I am Jewish, it will not matter.

If we join spirits as brothers and sister, the pain of our aloneness will be lessened, and that does matter.

In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.
(“A Litany of Restoration,” by Marjorie Bowens Wheatley)

Sermon

I was an undergraduate major in English literature. My university required of all English majors a year-long survey of English literature. I liked the first quarter pretty well, especially Chaucer, but I had stronger feelings about both the second and the third quarters.

In the second quarter, we read a lot of writers from the Age of Enlightenment, the last part of the 18th century and the early part of the nineteenth. Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, John Dryden: witty, emphasizing intellect over emotional or sensuous image, satirical, even when it seemed to me the subject was stupid and done to death. Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" is a mock epic, spending five 150+-line cantos narrating the scandalous theft of a tress of fair Belinda's hair. Five cantos in heroic couplets, which I pretty much hated then, as I pretty much hate now:

Then cease, bright nymph! to mourn thy ravished hair,
Which adds new glory to the shining sphere!
Not all the tresses that fair head can boast,
Shall draw such envy as the lock you lost.

I was never one to rebel against literature of any sort, so I carried on. But, in today's jargon, it never really "resonated" with me. Then we hit the nineteenth century, and the Romantic poets. Now *this* was a little more like it.

Lord Byron wrote a mock heroic epic, but it is on the Don Juan story, it has numerous amusing and sensuous moments, and it is written in ottava rima: stanzas have eight lines of iambic pentameter, rhyming abababcc. When he did use heroic couplets, in another poem, somehow it just sounded different:

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

That quarter I wandered lonely as a cloud with Wordsworth; I thrilled to Keats' "A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

I learned that the Romantic writers were part of a pendulum swing away from the intellectual, satirical, less emotional style of the earlier period. I knew myself to be a Romantic.

Many, many years later, studying American Unitarian history in preparation for the ministry, the issues were re-visited for me.

From about 1740-1743 Jonathan Edwards and others had created an intensely-emotional, distinctly UnUnitarian, religious revival in America, known as the Great Awakening. It had great success in converting people to a fervent sense of the Holy Ghost's immediacy, and convincing them that Calvinistic doctrines of original sin were correct.

Unitarian ministers, always a scholarly bunch not given to excesses of emotion in public or religious life (proper Bostonians, almost to a man), were put off, both personally and intellectually. One said, "There is the Religion of the *Understanding* and *Judgment*, and *Will*, as well as of the *Affections*." (Wright, xiii)

The Unitarians understood the power of emotionally-based religion, and considered it untrustworthy in the extreme. So, to combat it they turned their considerable talents to the intellect, to Biblical scholarship coming out of Germany. These men preached rationalism in religion, meaning that they had "confidence in the

human capacity, by use of reason, to *know* the will of God.” (Wright, xiv) They believed, with deeply-committed passion, that fearless Biblical scholarship—understanding that inspired humans wrote the Bible at different times—would reveal God’s truth to humanity. Their studies convinced them that most of what passed for truth in orthodox religion was not scripturally based, but came from creeds and dogmatic systems. They were radicals in their time, reviled by formerly-collegial neighboring ministers. Harvard Divinity School was founded in 1815, “in accordance with the principles of pure, rational and undogmatic Christianity.” (Wright, 20) (Unitarians were, of course, still in the Christian fold.)

You may have noticed that this period of our history more or less coincides with my second quarter’s writers of the Age of Enlightenment, and that faith in human reason and intellect is the highest value. (I acknowledge the oversimplification of any generalization, even one that is fairly true.)

So, it is no surprise that a reaction arises. Enter the Transcendentalists.

Ralph Waldo Emerson tells us that “the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds...within us is the soul of the whole...” Theodore Parker says, “I did not find the Bible inspired, except in this general way, and in proportion to the truth and justice therein.” (Miller, 485) He becomes a radical abolitionist.

Margaret Fuller, one of the few women Transcendentalists—brilliant and passionate—takes up the cudgel of justice as Parker had, her most famous work arguing persuasively for the equality of women. She goes to Italy to work for the popular revolution going on there, falls in love with a count and has a baby. (Definitely more a Romantic than Rationalist New England way to behave.)

Henry David Thoreau, goes to Walden Pond, taking to nature, one of the places of spiritual and emotional inspiration for Transcendentalists. As we see in our children’s story, he also joins Parker and Fuller in speaking out against the established order, refusing to pay taxes to a state that allows slavery. Although he only had to spend a night in jail, his rich inner life—born of reflection and attention, not scholarship—keeps him content.

The Rationalists felt they had fought a good fight and left a shining legacy to the upcoming generation. But the younger people turned out to be a generation of vipers, from their view. Emerson absolutely scandalized the established clergy with his Harvard Divinity Address, delivered to the senior class in July, 1838. He speaks extensively about the “intuition of the moral sentiment [being] an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul” (Wright 2, 92). He rhapsodizes about the Oversoul, “that one mind...everywhere alive, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool.” (93)

It is bad enough, all this emoting about how religious sentiment is found within the heart of people, but it gets worse. Emerson simply takes aim at the establishment and shoots: “...historical Christianity [remember, Unitarianism was still very much a part of liberal Christianity at this point] destroys the power of preaching, by withdrawing it from the exploration of the moral nature of man, where the sublime is...” (105) “I think no man can go with his thoughts about him, into one of our churches, without feeling, that what hold the public worship had on men is gone, or going.” (106) Emerson declares that that he has, in this address, contrasted the Church with Soul, and “in the soul, then, let the redemption be sought.” You can see where this leaves the devoted churchmen who have been his teachers.

Not surprisingly but very sadly, the Transcendentalists caused major rifts, more or less along generational lines. One of the older men accused them of practicing “mystagogy.”

Now you might guess that I have always identified with them and their mystical, nature-loving, individual-soul-trusting, rapturous ways, and if so, you would be guessing correctly. At the same time, I see things as much less clear-cut than I did in those olden days at Stanford.

Here is why (besides age fuzzing the edges of easy blacks and whites): In matters concerning my beloved faith tradition, I am looking for bridges, not walls. I am looking for ways to articulate that Unitarian Universalism does not have to enact the metaphor of pendulum, ponderously swinging from one mutually-exclusive side to another. Rather, we can enact a spectrum, with gradations of light moving along side by side by side, creating illumination and warmth.

We are as human as the next person, and have just as much trouble as the next bunch of people remaining genuinely open to new ideas and ideas that are different from ours. In the late nineteenth century, there were two decades of rift between two warring factions of Unitarianism—twenty whole years of functioning separately.

There was some excuse for the theological wrangling of the nineteenth century, though, because there had in fact been liberal Christian tenets to which Unitarians were expected to subscribe. We twenty-first century Unitarian Universalists have no such excuse. Our great, shining strength lies in our affirming acceptance of all religious points of view, and in our trying our fallible best to practice such acceptance.

In this congregation, we have people with Enlightenment kinds of minds, people who love analysis and the intellect, who know words are powerful and who want little or no truck with traditional words like “God” or “Jesus” or “worship” or “prayer.” We often call them humanists. Some of them absolutely decry the move toward “the spiritual” which our faith has taken in the past twenty or so years.

In this congregation, we have people with Transcendentalist kinds of minds, people who feel keenly the oneness of all things, who love the hard-to-articulate worlds of mysticism and so wish to reclaim the old, misused words that once evoked awe and wonder. We often call them theists (sometimes Christians). Some of them dismiss humanism as heartless and would feel comfortable with Emerson’s characterization of humanists as “corpse-cold” Unitarians.

(We also have pagans and atheists and agnostics and Buddhists and Jews and eclectics, but they don’t cause each other quite the trouble that the Enlightenment and Transcendentalist folks seem to.)

It is the human connection that saves us from ourselves. It is the respect we cherish for one another as fellow travelers that keeps us from the either-or metaphor of the pendulum.

Our redemption—our success in being honest-to-God-or-Whatever UUs—lies in the respect and love we practice with each other through the ups and downs of religious community. Salvation from the us-vs.-them mentality that plagues all human beings springs from the humble understanding that each of us knows only a piece of the Great Mystery, and that we must therefore be with each other in deepest respect, pooling our tiny knowledges. We understand that we *can* be with each other in deepest respect, and that that’s what our faith is all about.

Once there was an older couple—both dead now—old, old-time members of our congregation, stalwart humanist UUs for generations. They were always nice, and we had an excellent relationship, but they didn't much "resonate" with my Transcendentalist-type orientation. He would say, referring to our silence before Joys and Sorrows, "It's the longest two minutes of my week." They came only sometimes. After I had been here for ten or so years (this is my sixteenth year), they wrote us a note saying that Unitarian Universalism had simply gone conservative on them—that was their take on the use of traditional religious language and the constant appearance of the word "spiritual" in UU publications. They tendered their resignation. It was an awful blow.

So three of us—two long-time congregation members and myself, spanning almost three generations—paid them a visit. With tears in our eyes—literally—we just said, "It's inconceivable that your two names will not be in the membership book of the Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, whatever anyone's theology or philosophy is." I said, "I don't know the person capable of taking up a pen and crossing out your names." They were amazed at the strength of the bonds forged over the years (a little embarrassed, too, bless them), and they stayed. For each of their memorial services, there was standing-room-only (we held his in Cathedral of the Rockies). Christians came. Humanists came. Agnostics came. Jews came. Devout God believers and equally devout God dismissers came. The love and the service that these two had lavished on life were far, far more important than the approach any of us took to the Great Unknowable Questions.

Sure, Chuck Hansen is going to his grave espousing humanist views. Sure, Elizabeth Greene will go to hers enamored of the mystical. Sure, Bob Wallace will exit this life as he started, a Jew. Don will probably remain a pagan and Mike a Buddhist. Maybe even the ten-plus folks who anonymously answered "yes" to the question on the junior-high questionnaire, "Do you believe Jesus died for you?" will cling to their faith and will have the courage to speak about it to the rest of us. It could happen....

We need not estrange ourselves from one another. We can create a shining religious community containing all the points on the spectrum. We need not feel diminished because the pendulum is on some "other" side. We can look around, and feel the differences, and embrace them and learn from them—and create a beacon that reaches out to more and more seekers. A beacon shining love and acceptance into this old world, which so badly needs it.

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