

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Free Religion”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 25, 2007

Spoken Meditation

This poem was published in the *Index*, the journal of the Free Religious Association, without attribution, probably by the editor, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, of whom you'll be hearing more later.

The Stray Sunbeam (1859)

Alone I walked the busy street,
 With cries and wheels and footsteps loud,
 Where kindred hearts unconscious meet,
 and part forever in the crowd

I threaded slow the populous mart,
 Unnoticed midst the thunderous din
 Watching the stream with aching heart
 For sorrow sat enthroned within.

“O Life!” I said, “Thronged solitude.”
 ‘Thou ceaseless, pitiless, loveless fray
 Where Passion’s hell begotten brood
 Wrangle for unresisting prey!

How black the angry torrent rolls:
 on earth below, the heaven above,
 There is no light for darkened souls--
 For wounded hearts no healing love.

Leaning against a window pane
 There stood a fair and ruddy child
 I looked and looked and looked again
 Until he caught my look and smiled

I nodded as I drew more nigh;
 The dimples deepened on his cheek
 And mirth grew riotous in his eye
 And baby lips essayed to speak.

As on I moved with footsteps slow
 The more I laughed, the more laughed he
 I turned my head to look, and lo!
 His face still shone with infant glee.

An envious corner made eclipse
of that sweet star; and I passed by
The smile yet lingering on my lips.
The warm tear starting in my eye.

“Thank God for childish smiles,” I said,
“For dew drops on the parching leaf--
For wild flowers in the forest shade--
For starlight in the night of grief!

Father! accept the grateful prayer
Thank-offering for thy wondrous grace
For Love unseen, like vital air,
Holds all the earth in thy embrace.

Sermon

There is one word that will immediately divide a Unitarian Universalist congregation. This word is used in just about every other religious organization in the world. Not only is it used, it shapes and directs all the activities in the organization. It expresses the one core belief that brings everyone together and finds agreement, except us.

That word is ... God.

To understand why, we need to know our history.

The first Unitarians were not as radical as we might want to look back and imagine them. They divided from the Congregationalists in the beginning of the nineteenth century over the divinity of Jesus and the nature of humanity. Influenced by the European Biblical scholarship, the Copernican scientific revolution, and the American political revolution, they saw our human potential as greater than total depravity. To govern ourselves, there must be something good in us that could rise to the surface through debate and elections. The seed of human value was planted by the Puritan's establishment of self-government in their churches by the elect. The enlargement of the idea of the elect to the electorate transformed American civilization. The Unitarians were the first to catch this elevation of the human spirit and apply it to religion.

But they were still the Boston elite. They didn't want to stray too far from their Congregationalist heritage. Jesus and the sacraments were still the center of their worship life. The human capacity for sin still tormented much of humanity. The Unitarians believed this vulnerability could only to be overcome through self-discipline and development of character using Jesus as the model of righteousness. For the orthodox Unitarians in the years 1820 to 1850, Jesus was still Lord and savior.

Enter those iconoclastic transcendentalists. Emerson's challenge to look inside and find God intuitively shook them up. The orthodox Unitarians, still suspicious of the power of sin to delude us, continued to look exclusively for God's guidance in the Bible. The

miracles Jesus performed proved his divine lineage. But to rightly understand the text, one needed to use rational analysis.

The conflict between the orthodox and the transcendentalists came to a head, just as the final shots of the Civil War were being fired. The Rev. Henry Whitney Bellows, fresh from his leadership of the Sanitary Commission formed in 1861 to promote clean and healthy conditions in the Union Army camps, saw an opportunity to bring Unitarians together in a more cohesive organization. The American Unitarian Association, formed in 1825, was a weak organization of individuals with little purpose, energy or direction. Bellows and other leading Unitarians wanted to start planting new churches and expand the Unitarian movement as people moved west.

Bellows organized a convention in April of 1865 to form a new organization of churches rather than individuals called the National Council of Unitarian Churches. As part of this organizing process, the orthodox thought this would be a great opportunity to bring those radical transcendentalists to heel. Sensing the waning of this movement, they drafted a constitution that stated that its members were disciples of “the Lord Jesus Christ. This statement was like poking a stick in the transcendentalist beehive. After all, it even smacked of Trinitarianism for heavens sake! The transcendentalists objected to this language at the organizing meeting in New York City but were silenced by crafty parliamentary procedure. The battle lines were drawn.

The next twelve months anticipating the first annual meeting of this new organization of Unitarians were full of discussion and debate as people chose sides. At the meeting held in Syracuse, the procedures were amended to allow a fuller debate. The Rev. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, a leading dissenter, brought a substitute preamble that he had printed and distributed it so he couldn’t be ignored this time. His language was: “the object of Christianity is the universal diffusion of Love, Righteousness, and Truth” with a provision of reservation of private judgment claiming “perfect freedom of thought is at once the right and duty of every human being.” The basis of the council should be “unity of spirit rather than uniformity of beliefs.”

When the votes came, the orthodox were not ready to “haul down the Christian flag.” The reformers left the Conference very discouraged. Abbot “left the Conference convinced that Unitarianism had renounced forever its ancient principle of free inquiry, and that henceforward Christianity and freedom must be irreconcilable foes.”

The ministers who formed the core of the dissent started meeting on the train home from Syracuse and discussed how they would respond. Before the end of October, they met at the home of Cyrus Bartol on Beacon Hill. It didn’t take long before they had settled on their response, to form their own Association dedicated to free thought.

At their first public meeting May 30, 1867 in spacious Horticultural Hall, they brought in speakers from the Quakers, the liberal Jews, the liberal minded Universalists, even the Spiritualists, the “come-outers,” and scientific theists as well as those radical Unitarian transcendentalists to form the base of the organization. Ralph Waldo Emerson opened the meeting giving his blessing to the undertaking to a standing room only crowd. The

sequence of invited speakers immediately showed two characteristics that would frame the organization till its last gasp. First, everyone was united in rejecting dogmatic authority in religion, whether of scripture, creed, or authoritative revelation. They sought a source of religious truth equally available to all humanity. Second, everyone was ready and willing to criticize the other speakers with whom they disagreed. They couldn't agree on the fundamental religious problems of the existence of God and the possibility of personal immortality. From the very start, the Free Religious Association had no positive core to hold it together. The most the organization could do was hold yearly meetings and publish a journal to exchange ideas.

Two schools of thought quickly emerged among the free religionists. These two schools are extremely important because, in different forms and language, they continue to divide our congregations today. On one side were the transcendentalists led by Emerson and Octavius Frothingham:

The transcendentalists professed [an] unshakable faith in God and immortality through the assurance of immediate intuition or "higher reason." They entertained grave doubt whether any mere rational process of thought could provide these assurances, although their intuitive perceptions of the fundamental religious truths were for them facts as real and demonstrable as the brute facts that constituted the subject matter of natural science.

On the other side were the skeptics and the atheists who looked to scientific investigation as the only way to reveal the truth. They disputed the existence of higher reason at all. They deferred the question of the existence and nature of God and immortality to scientific discovery and proof. At best, they were open questions. Only the scientific method could settle these questions once and for all.

The scientific materialists and theists realized the state of science would not permit much progress on resolving these questions. But the social sciences were just beginning to get going. These held huge promise in the 1870's and 1880's.

Since I gave good attention to the transcendentalist, Samuel Johnson, last week, I think it only fair we pay attention to one of the scientific theists this week. Francis Ellington Abbot was one of the key people in the founding and support of the Free Religious Association. He edited their journal, the Index, for a dozen or so years. Sadly, Abbot paid a heavy price for his advocacy of free thought.

Abbot, who graduated at the top of his class at Harvard, was a promising young preacher. His first settlement was in Dover, New Hampshire. Over his first several years of tenure, his theology became freer and freer to the alarm of his more orthodox congregation. A turning point in his ministry came when he preached a sermon on "The Essence of Christianity." He started out rejecting the Christian idea of the fall and restoration of man through Christ. Revelation was not sealed but continued to progress. God continued to reveal himself through the Divine Idea. The Divine Idea evolved from its authoritarian beginnings into a free Unitarian faith. That faith transcended Christianity by embracing

all religions that shared Christ's spirit and followed God's will be they Pagan, Deist or Atheist. He said:

“There are but two parties in this world—those who live for self, and those who live for something higher and purer than self, and all such, whether this something be a personal God, or an impersonal law of duty, or the mere impulse and instinct of benevolence, share the spirit of Christ.”

Why I'm particularly attracted to Abbot and why I wanted to share some of his words with you this morning comes from reading his book, “Scientific Theism.” There are sections of this book that are amazingly contemporary. I've found his insight into the division between the transcendentalists and the realists (that we still experience in our congregations) very illuminating.

Abbot locates the problem in epistemology, the study of how we know what we know. Kant's introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, draws the demarcation. Basically we can't know things **as they really are**. We can only know **our mental representation** of things as they really are. We are blind men crawling over the elephant getting partial information but not getting the complete picture. Kant rigorously presented an earlier, turn of the millennium view, called Nominalism, that teaches that “things conform to cognition,” not “cognition to things.” We see what we want to see. We cannot see things as they really are. Nominalism, works nicely with the intuitive perspective that receives the highest truth directly rather than from the world of the senses and personal experience.

Science works on the opposite principle. Universal laws independent of the human mind are what it seeks. Through repeated experiment done by many minds, truths can be discovered and verified. Science can continue to push back the fog of ignorance and open the veil of mysteries to actually know things as they really are. Beginning with Socrates, realists have worked from reality to the world of eternal ideas and forms to give shape to our mental contents.

Nominalists and Realists just don't understand and appreciate each other, for good reason. Their views have no middle ground when it comes to God. **Either** you have some kind of convincing inner personal experience that persuades you to believe, **or** you look outwardly for external evidence to believe. The intuitionists just know their right and seek external evidence to prove their inward feeling. The realists may or may not believe based on their personal experience and secondary sources but don't have that inner certainty the intuitionists have.

I've been on both sides of this issue. I grew up a secular humanist. Until I had an intuitive experience playing chess at the age of twenty-three, I had no idea that was even possible. An exploration of the intuitive world drew me into the ministry and the practice of meditation. Yet I haven't abandoned my desire to be a realist, too.

Neither does Abbot. He tried to see if he could identify some middle ground. The middle ground for him was in the world of **relationships** not in absolutes. We may or

may not be able to know things as they are, but we can know how things *relate* to each other. Our minds are very, very good at recognizing the relationships between things. By focusing on constantly enriching our awareness of relationships, we learn what is most important and most relevant to the area of religion. What we really need to know is how to relate to each other. The answer to this question is easy. Love.

The fruition of the Free Religious Association came in 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions at the Chicago Exposition. Representatives of the world's religions met for the first time in human history to discuss their differences and similarities from the platform rather than the battlefield. The Free Religionists were there, jubilant to see occur what they had only dreamed of just 20 years before, yet disappointed by the gulfs between the religious leaders that remained.

The controversy with the Unitarians formally ended in 1894 at the Unitarian conference that was held in Saratoga Springs, New York. The moderator presented a new statement of unity: "Love to God and Love to Man" that passed unanimously.

And who was sitting in the audience, experiencing a crisis of his own Methodist faith? William Brundage.

As part of my sabbatical, I spent a couple of days at the Unitarian Universalist Association looking through their old files and books. I examined the folder for our congregation and found a crumbling newspaper clipping with the text of William Brundage's first Unitarian sermon at the Leland Opera House, in 1895. He invited those listening to restart the First Unitarian Society of Albany that had been dormant for the last 20 years. In the sermon are echoes of the Free Religionists' words. While they had been unable to build their own movement, their ideas had gradually won over the Unitarians completely by the 1894 Convention. Brundage was right there with them.

I close with a few of Brundage's words from that sermon:

Perfect freedom of thought will be guaranteed to every member of this new society... We have no dogma to defend. We have no "articles of religion"—no dogmatic confession of faith to hinder us in our free inquiry. We are not obliged in our study of science, philosophy and history to find confirmation for certain conclusions which are already accepted on an eternal authority. We accept no other authority in our ethical and religious thinking than the authority that is within...

... We therefore trust the reason of humanity. We hail all light from every quarter of the universe. What we demand is not a comfortable faith that cannot be verified; what we demand is truth, fact, reality in just so far as we can find it...

... the life and teaching of Jesus ... commends itself when once thoroughly understood to the universal reason, to the universal heart of humanity. We do not underestimate the importance of other teachers, of other divine lives.

The prophets of ancient Israel attract us by their insistence upon righteousness and they are our teachers as well as Jesus. Buddha Gautama attracts us by his divine love for and service to man and he is our teacher. Zoroaster, by his devotion to the light, the symbol of truth attracts us. Socrates attracts us. Confucius attracts us. Mohamet attracts us. We recognize all these teachers as divine, as inspired by God just as truly as Jesus was inspired...

We therefore accept the religion of Jesus as practically summed up in love to God and love to man.

Benediction

I'll close with lines from the poem by Lord Tennyson Brundage used to close his first sermon, ringing the bell for a New Year, a new day in the rebirth of our society:

Ring out the false—ring in the true!
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind!

Ring out the slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife--
Ring in the nobler mode of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the time.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite.
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out the old shapes of foul disease,
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold!
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace!

May we find greater peace and understanding through knowing our history; discovering the men and women who have left us signs in their words of a greater love that we carry forward into the future.

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Selected References:

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