

To Convert Life into Truth

Readings: 'I Didn't Go to Church Today' by Ogden Nash
'The Tables Turned' by William Wordsworth
'Matins' by Denise Levertov

There is an irony in preaching about Ralph Waldo Emerson's Divinity School Address in a Unitarian Universalist Church. In the address, one of the most important sermons in the history of our faith, Emerson called the Unitarian church irrelevant to the search for religious truth. He quotes his wife, Lidian, who says that it is wicked to go to church on Sundays.¹ She believes that it is harder to commune with the holy on the Sabbath in religious services than it would be in nature, in solitude, in almost any other setting. She would be in full agreement with the Ogden Nash poem that accompanied our chalice lighting this morning. Emerson called the Unitarianism of his day "corpse cold," unfeeling, lifeless and rails against a boring, academic sermons.

To understand the Emersons' critique of our tradition – it is important to understand that Unitarianism has changed tremendously in the last one hundred and seventy seven years, in part because of the Divinity School address. In 1838, Unitarianism was the relatively new name for an emerging liberal Christianity. It was centered in the Boston area and nearly all of its ministers were trained at Harvard. The Unitarians of that time considered themselves the liberal, leading edge of Christianity. They were deeply committed to biblical scholarship, using their knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and history to discern which passages in the Bible were authentic and which were later additions. They believed that not every word in the Bible is historically accurate and literally true. This approach was radical at the time, though it is now very common among mainline Christians. The Unitarians' scholarship led them to their belief that Jesus was not God. They believed he was a uniquely divine revelation and that the miracles the Gospels describe were historical facts.² These early Unitarians believed in One God, not the Trinity. This view of Jesus wasn't what they considered the most important innovations of their emerging denomination—most would argue that the use of reason and scholarship to access truth mattered more than their views of Jesus, but this departure from traditional views of Jesus most outraged their opponents. There were vicious fights and church schisms over dueling understandings of the divinity of Jesus a generation before the divinity school address. Those who argued against our religious predecessors were the source of the name Unitarian. Originally, the name Unitarian was coined as an insult given to our religious forebearers by more Orthodox Christians, emphasizing that they were not Trinitarians. The Unitarians later claimed that name as their own... and we continue to today, even through the merger with the Universalist Church of America, even though our name is based on a theological position that many of us do not hold today.

Because of their commitment to the academic study of religion, among the Unitarians of Emerson's day, religious truth was the work of experts, those who knew biblical languages and could parse the ancient texts in their original language.³ This meant that the educated clergy had the most access to divine truth

¹ All quotes and paraphrases of the Divinity School Address come from 'Divinity School Address.' Emerson Texts. Retrieved from <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>.

² Dorrien Gary. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. page 68

³ Dorrien, 79

– and they spent their sermons expounding on it, explicating the meaning of Biblical passages in the original Greek or Hebrew, sharing what the latest history of textual formation had to say about the authenticity of the text. The Emersons—and likely others—found this approach to preaching very tedious.

Ralph Waldo Emerson knew the Unitarian world he criticized very well. His father was a Unitarian minister. He had graduated from Harvard Divinity not long before his address and many of the faculty who listened to him that July day had been his instructors. He had a brother who was a minister, briefly. Emerson himself also had a short career in the ministry. He left after a few years with doubts about his vocation, resigning his post when he felt as though he couldn't serve communion or lead the congregation with integrity.

A few years after his resignation, the graduating class of Harvard Divinity invited him to preach to them. In his address, he proclaims that the holy needs to be known first-hand, not through intermediaries like scripture, preachers, academics, or tradition. He challenged how the Unitarians of his day understood Jesus. Instead of a unique divine revelation, Emerson said that Jesus spoke of himself as divine because he wanted each of his followers to understand that they are also divine. He said that Jesus serves us through his holy thoughts, not through any innate holiness in his person.

After attacking the prevailing views of the day, Emerson proposed a new way to do theology, a new way to come to religious truth. He advocated for the importance of religious experience. He argued that every person has access to the holy and we should seek truth for ourselves rather than listen to others. Truth cannot be received second hand. He urged the new ministers he addressed 'to convert life into truth,' and to have their sermons not rely on biblical scholarship, but 'life passed through the fire of thought.'

He believed that each person should seek the truth independently. He said in words that reflect the use of gendered language prevalent in his day, "Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation Wesleys and Oberlins, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for those good men, but say, "I also am a man." Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it, because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator, something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's."

Emerson continues, "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost,-- cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Diety. Look to it first and only, that fashion, custom, authority, pleasure, and money are nothing to you, -- are not bandages over your eyes that you cannot see,-- but live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind."

This was a radical idea. People finding religious truth in their own experience, not through scripture, tradition, or the teachings of others was a radical idea. As you might imagine, the Unitarian establishment of the time were outraged by Emerson's address. He challenged much of what they held dear – the institution of the church, the academic study of the Bible as a source of truth, the formal training of clergy and their privileged position. They took their opposition to the press. Dueling articles and letters to the editor filled the pages of the Unitarian magazines of the day – and some of the secular Boston newspapers.

At its heart, this theological fight was about how we know religious truth. The fancy philosophical word for this, for theory of knowledge, is epistemology. Work that into a sentence the next time you want to

impress someone. The establishment Unitarians believed that the most reliable sources of truth were scripture, tradition, and reason. That is why their sermons were impersonal and largely academic. Emerson had a radically different view. He ranked personal experience more important than other sources of knowledge. This infuriated his opponents. They wanted him to make a rational case for the arguments he put forth in the divinity school address. He wouldn't, because he knew what he said was true from his experience and didn't believe that arguing was an effective way to convince someone of the truth. They should have their own experience. This fight dragged on for decades.

As you might have already guessed from your experience here at People's Church, Emerson's camp, the transcendentalists, ultimately won this fight. It took a few generations and is an interesting story that I don't have time to detail this morning. Now, every Unitarian Universalist Congregation affirms and promotes six sources for our faith. The first would make Emerson proud: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." The rest of the sources speak of prophets, world religions, the Judeo-Christian tradition, reason and science, and earth-centered traditions. Scripture, which was an important source of religious truth to the Unitarians of the 1830s has fallen off our list in the intervening years. It is no longer listed by name as a source of our tradition. This is not to say that holy texts aren't important to many individuals in our congregations, just that they are not considered a primary source of truth across the denomination.

Emerson—and the other Transcendentalists who made similar arguments—made room for mysticism in our tradition, made room for the people whose primary way of understanding the holy is through personal experience. The mystics are the ones who acquaint themselves firsthand with the authentic, with Deity, with the Spirit, the intimate and the ultimate. Though there are mystics in every religious tradition, the establishment Unitarians of the 1830s had no room for mysticism. They wanted their truth foot-noted and replicable.

The primacy of religious experience in Unitarian Universalism today is one of our most distinguishing characteristics. It is the core of my "elevator speech," the short description of Unitarian Universalism that I give when people ask me about our faith. If you don't have an elevator speech, I encourage you to create one, so you are prepared for the next time someone asks you about our faith. I usually say something like, "We Unitarian Universalists believe that each person comes to their own understanding of the truth through their own thinking and experience. Since everyone thinks differently and has different experiences, this means that our congregations are communities of diverse believers. We have atheists and Christians, Jews and Buddhists, Pagans, agnostics, and people who don't have good words to describe their beliefs. We are bound together by some shared values, like every person deserves respect and everything is interconnected. We all come together as a church to support one another, to worship together, to educate our children, and to make the world a better place. And it's hard to describe, so the best way to understand us is to come on a Sunday morning. The service starts at 10:45."

Despite the irony of preaching on the Divinity School address in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I chose this topic for today because our children are having their first religious education classes of the church year. Emerson would approve of how we teach our children here. The goal of our religious education program is not to teach our children about what is holy by relaying other's experiences, but to acquaint them first hand with Deity, or whatever word they use for what is most important to them. Our

children will not be memorizing... they will be wondering. Their questions will be taken seriously. They will learn stories and metaphors and the history of our faith. And, most importantly, they will be loved into being by their teachers and their classmates. The relationships they create in the classrooms here and transformative.

As one Unitarian Universalist religious educator puts it, "At the heart of our work with children is the understanding that 'spirituality' is relational consciousness. Children inherently possess an existential-spiritual awareness, a sensing of sacred mystery pulsing at the core of their being and knowing. Far beyond any lesson plan, this relational consciousness is the essential 'instruction' of religious education and emerges within a beloved community of trust and friendship."⁴

This is my experience. I was loved into being by a Unitarian Universalist congregation. As many of you know, my family, like many of the families here, started attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation when I was young, because my parents needed a community in which to raise my brother and me. I am the product of the religious education program. Church special events, like the camping trip and the all-chocolate potluck were the highlights of the year for us. The church was a place of refuge, a community where I didn't have to explain my poly-syllabic religion to people who had never heard of it or to classmates who thought I was destined for hell. It was a place where I was free to wonder and have others join me in my wondering. A place where adults and peers took me and my questions seriously. Obviously, as someone who "went pro" in our faith, attending that congregation changed my life, but I was not the only one. Nearly everyone in my religious education cohort is living lives of integrity, service and joy. The church equipped us to be ethical decision-makers, know our values, and to make the world better. Among those I am still in touch with from my Sunday school days, there is a doctor, a journalist, a jazz musician, an ice cream maker, a public health administrator, a preschool teacher, a carpenter, a director of religious education – all of us loved into being by the church that raised us. Not all of us practice the faith of our childhood now, but all of us were forever changed for the better by being raised within it.

Just imagine all the joy and meaning, love and justice that the children and youth in our religious education program will make manifest in our world in the years to come.

Right now, our children are also learning that we are part of a religious tradition that stretches across generations and across continents. I can vividly recall the first time I saw one of those lists of famous Unitarian Universalists. I was in fourth grade. For some reason, I had assumed that Unitarian Universalism was just the congregation I attended. I was amazed to learn that presidents and other people I had learned about in school shared our faith, that our faith is not limited to one congregation of a few hundred people in the Seattle suburbs, but stretches across time and space. Learning the important stories of our faith, stories like Ralph Waldo Emerson addressing the graduates of Harvard's Divinity College in 1838, helps our children develop a Unitarian Universalist identity. Developing that identity is one of the core goals of the Tapestry of Faith Religious Education program, which most of the children are following this year. The other goals are to nurture spiritual growth, a transforming faith, and vital communities of justice and love. The children of this congregation are being loved into being at this very moment and their lives will be forever changed because of it.

⁴ Hong, KP. 'Religious Education Journey Guide Job Description.' Unity Church—Unitarian, Saint Paul, MN. 2015.

So, on this first day of religious education for children and youth, may all of us of all ages embark on a year of wondering and learning.

May this community love all of us into being.

May we all be newborn bards of the Holy Ghost.

May we all live lives of integrity, service and joy.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.