



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

The Great End of Religious Instruction: The Legacy of William Ellery Channing

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In addition to our Seven Principles and Six Sources, I invite you to consider that we should add a ***Seventh Source: our own “Unitarian Universalist history and heritage.”*** While continuing to seek wisdom wherever we can find it — from all the world’s religions, modern science, and our own direct experience — we should also recognize our tradition’s homegrown resources. The roots of the *Unitarian* half of our heritage go back to the 1500s, beginning in Europe. And our Universalist roots go back to the 1700s here in North America.

Along these lines, last Sunday we reflected on the life of the innovative minister-scientist Dr. Joseph Priestley, who in addition to discovering Oxygen and inspiring the Jefferson Bible, also helped spread Unitarianism in this region. Priestley died in 1804, so he lived most of his life in the eighteenth-century. This week, I would like to shift our attention to the nineteenth-century, and the life of our Unitarian forebear William Ellery Channing (1780-1842).

I first heard of Unitarian Universalism in college. Our UU student group was called the Channing Circle. But I had no idea who Channing was! Our chapel here at UUCF is named the Channing Chapel. (Who was that guy?!) Less transparently, some of our oldest, largest, and most venerable UU congregations owe their names to Channing. *All Souls* Church Unitarian here in Washington, D.C and the Unitarian Church of *All Souls* in New York City (both of which are close to a thousand members each) as well as the 1,800-member *All Souls* Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma — that’s right: the largest UU congregation in the world is in Tulsa, Oklahoma!

— all three of those “All Souls” UU congregations owe their name to a famous passage from Channing in which he said: **“I am a living member of the great Family of *All Souls*; and I cannot improve or suffer myself, without diffusing good or evil around me through an ever-enlarging sphere”** (17).

That sounds a lot like a nineteenth-century version of Dr. King’s famous quote that, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Or in the words of our Seventh Principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” What Channing meant — and what inspired those UU congregations to take the name “All Souls” — is that all of us, despite all our diversity, are part of the same human family. (Here in the twenty-first century, many would extend that sense of family and interdependence to *all beings*.) Accordingly, how we treat ourselves and others matters because the effects ripple out, either increasing or decreasing the amount of compassion or cruelty in the world. Again, in Channing’s words, **“I cannot improve or suffer myself, without diffusing good or evil around me through an ever-enlarging sphere.”**

To begin to tell you some about the author of that phrase “I am a living member of the great Family of *All Souls*” and the namesake of our UUCF Chapel, William Ellery Channing was born in 1780, and died at age 62 in 1842. To set him in context, keep in mind that Ralph Waldo Emerson’s breakout book *Nature* was published in 1836, almost at the end of Channing’s life. **Channing loomed large when Emerson was coming into his own, and Emerson called him “our bishop”** as a sign of the esteem in which Channing was held ([Delbanco ix](#)). Emerson wrote further that, “Dr. Channing, whilst he lived, was the star of the American church, and we then thought, if we do not still think, that he left no successor in the pulpit” ([Selected Writings 4](#)).

And one among many reasons that Channing continues to be an important figure for us to consider today is that, whereas Emerson left his Unitarian pulpit for the lecture circuit after only a short time, and whereas his fellow Transcendentalist minister George Ripley left his Unitarian congregation for the [utopian community at Brook Farm](#), Channing stayed for almost four decades (1803-1842) in the same Unitarian congregation, Federal Street Church in Boston (now

known as Arlington Street Church). **He was twenty-three when Federal Street ordained and installed him, and he stayed for the rest of his life (55).**

If you are interested in learning more about Channing, perhaps the best starting place is a biography written by Jack Mendelsohn, one of Channing's mid-twentieth-century successors in our Arlington Street pulpit. Mendelsohn subtitled his biography of Channing ***The Reluctant Radical*** because, unlike the more naturally radical Theodore Parker, Channing's inclinations were for moderation. But starting in 1831 and for the next and final decade of his life, Channing finally began to speak and publish with increasing frankness and boldness against slavery, the great moral evil of his time. But he retained hope that slavery might be ended without war.

And although Channing is not always remembered today, Mendelsohn writes that:

In 1880, the one-hundredth anniversary of Channing's birth, elaborate public celebrations sprang up throughout the United States, in Great Britain, Ireland, and Europe. Enthusiastic tributes flowed from Asia. [The minister at the time of the Unitarian Church of *All Souls* in New York City said] **“Of Channing, we do not say that he *was*, but he *is*, a burning and shining light; and the season has not even reached its meridian, when the Church and the world are willing to rejoice in his light.” (5)**

Perhaps surprising, given his influence, **Channing stood only five-feet tall, weighed only about 100 pounds, and was sickly and weak most of his life (Mendelsohn 6).**

Along these lines, one of the powerful recurring themes in UU history is of individuals studying the Bible (and other scriptures) for themselves, choosing to honor the truth of their reason and direct experience, and liberating themselves from oppressive religious traditions. But another more disturbing theme from our history is that many UU leaders from our past, including Channing and Theodore Parker, ruined their health through overwork.

Channing had an almost monk-like ascetic side, and pushed himself far too hard as a young minister. He would regularly stay up for hours past midnight reading by candlelight. He often slept “on the hard floor without blankets,” and he did not eat enough, leaving himself frequently malnourished. Using today's medical insights, one educated guess is that **Channing was sickly for the rest of his life because at the beginning of his career, “the anxiety, stress,**

and exhaustion ...[took a] terrible toll [on his] adrenal glands,” weakening his body permanently (Mendelsohn 44). The cautionary tale here is similar to my sermon about Ariana Huffington’s “wake up call” after passing out from overwork. Being famous and successful, or having the potential to be, will not protect you from the consequences of neglecting self-care. Eating well, exercising, meditating, getting adequate rest and vacation is vitally important for all of us. Channing’s story is a reminder to take care of yourself for the long run.

We are also rapidly approaching **May 5, 2019, which will be the 200th anniversary of Channing delivering what may be the most significant, well-known, and influential sermon in Unitarian history** — a sermon he delivered at the ordination of the new Unitarian minister of the congregation we know today as First Unitarian Church of Baltimore, Maryland. So perhaps in addition to encouraging you to plan a pilgrimage to tour Joseph Priestley’s house, which is about 2.5 hours from here, in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, I also want to heighten your awareness of the significance of what later became known as Channing’s “Baltimore Sermon,” as we approach its 200th anniversary and the events being planned for that commemoration. We can also anticipate together the year after that, 2020, which will be the 250th anniversary of John Murray’s first Universalist sermon, delivered on the Jersey Shore.

Although our Unitarian roots go back at least to the 1500s in Europe, it is important not to project all our contemporary Unitarian Universalist perspectives onto our UU ancestors. The implications of anti-Trinitarianism and religious liberalism evolved over time. And it took centuries for us to reach the robust religious pluralism that we celebrate today. But reflecting on our history can make us grateful that, “we stand on the shoulders of giants”—and inspire us to be intentional about the ways that we, right here in Frederick, are helping shape the future of Unitarian Universalism, such that others in that future might stand on *our* shoulders.

To offer an example from our past, although some of our ancestors such as Faustus Socinus in the 1500s and Joseph Priestley in the 1700s did teach that Jesus was fully human (just like the rest of us), many others of our ancestors, including William Ellery **Channing, while rejecting the Trinity as irrational and unscriptural, still continued to think that both Jesus and Christianity were special and superior and uniquely important in history.** Consider this passage from Channing: “Jesus Christ is more than a man...existed before the world...literally

came from heaven to save our race...still acts for our benefit, and is our intercessor with the Father” (Selected Writings 43).

Moreover, in the early nineteenth-century, “Unitarian” was not a label that many of our forebears claimed. They saw themselves, rather, as open-minded congregationalist Christians. **“Unitarian” was, at that time, often a negative epithet used by orthodox Christians to criticize theological liberals.** From the perspective of Channing and others of the time, being a “Unitarian” or an “Anti-trinitarian” was not the most essential difference about them. What was most important to them was teaching that *God is love* (as opposed to the orthodox/Calvinist teaching of a God of judgement and fear), that all human beings have *free will and tremendous potential for doing good in the world* (as opposed to orthodox/Calvinist doctrines of Original Sin and predestination), and *emulating Jesus’ ethics and teachings* (as opposed to fixating on what various people believe about Jesus).

Channing’s desire was for this theologically-liberal perspective to be viewed as a mainstream way of being Christian in the modern world (Selected Writings 62). But starting in 1805, the public controversy between the orthodox Christians and liberal Christians heated up. So when Channing was invited to deliver an ordination sermon for the new minister at First Unitarian Baltimore in 1819, **he took the bold step of taking the word “Unitarian” that his critics were using as a pejorative and fully embracing it on his own terms.**

That famous sermon was titled “Unitarian Christianity.” And to give you a point of comparison, my sermons are typically a little more than 2,000 words and take about 20 minutes to deliver. **Channing’s “Unitarian Christianity” was seven-times-longer at 14,000 words, and took about an hour-and-a-half to deliver** (Mendelsohn 160). (Then again, they didn’t have tv and the internet back then, so there was less competition!) This particular sermon, often referred to as Channing’s “Baltimore Sermon,” became a sensation. It was quickly published and “no pamphlet, save only Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, had ever before circulated so widely in this county” (Wright 13).

Keep in mind that the year is 1819 — almost 200 years ago, and decades before the Civil War or the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* — and Channing was unabashedly asserting in that famous sermon that, **“the Bible is a book written for [humans], in the**

language of [humans], and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books.” This “Baltimore Sermon” helped galvanize theologically-liberal ministers, a process which continued six years later in 1825, when a gathering of like-minded ministers in the basement of Channing’s Federal Street Church founded the American Unitarian Association, which in turn, more than a century later, merged with the Universalist Church of America to form the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961.

As we continue to reflect on Channing’s legacy for us today — a legacy of organizing around the name “Unitarian,” a legacy of the consequences of overwork and the importance of self-care, and a legacy of remembering that we are each “a living member of the great Family of *All Souls* — I invite you to hear once more a version of those **famous words you heard earlier in the Spoken Meditation, words that Channing spoke in 1837 before the Sunday School Society about his vision of religious education**, a speech which is truly one of the foundational rationales for our unique existence today as a congregation:

In our life together here as a religious community,

May your mind be stirred up — quickened and strengthened with the power of thought;

May you learn to trust what you see when you look at the world inquiringly and steadily with your own eyes.

May you be inspired with a fervent love of truth;

May you find time and space for stillness that you might look inside yourself to touch inward springs.

May your conscience — your moral discernment — be awakened that you might look with impartial, conscientious judgment at whatever subjects may be offered to your decision;

And may your soul be woken up that together we might cherish an authentic spiritual life.

May it be so for us and for generations to come.