

***Spiritual Freedom* – a sermon by Laurel Hallman  
 Union Sunday, Baltimore Maryland  
 May 4, 2008**

**FIRST READING**

**from the sermon *Spiritual Freedom* by William Ellery Channing  
 preached at the Annual Election, May 26, 1830.(In a section on Religion and  
 Politics)**

**All the truths of religion conspire to one end—spiritual liberty. . .  
 It teaches us to look on the universe as pervaded, quickened, and vitally  
 joined into one harmonious and beneficent whole, by (God’s) ever-present  
 and omnipotent love. By this truth. . . it turns the mind for the visible, the  
 outward and perishable, to the Unseen, Spiritual, and Eternal, and, allying it  
 with pure and great objects, makes it free. . .**

**You tell me, how by the powers (of civilization) man masters and  
 bends to his use the powers of nature. I know he masters them, but it is to  
 become in turn their slave. He explores and cultivates the earth, but it is to  
 grow more earthly. He explores the hidden mine, but it is to forge himself  
 chains. He visits all religions, but therefore lives a stranger to his own soul.  
 . . . . .**

**I know that it is supposed that political wisdom can so form  
 institutions as to extract from them freedom, notwithstanding a people’s  
 sins. The chief expedient for this purpose has been to balance, as it is  
 called, men’s passions and interests against each other; to use one man’s  
 selfishness as a check against his neighbor’s; to produce peace by the  
 counteraction and equilibrium of hostile forces. This whole theory I**

distrust. The vices can by no management or skilful poisoning be made to do the work of virtue. Our own history has already proved this. Our government was founded on the doctrine of checks and balances; and what does experience teach us? It teaches, what have the principles of our nature might have taught, that whenever the country is divided into two great parties, the dominant party will possess itself of both branches of the legislature, and of the different departments of the state, and will move towards its objects with as little check, and with as determined purpose, as if all powers were concentrated in a single body. There is no substitute for virtue. Free institutions secure rights only when secured by, and when invigorating that spiritual freedom, that moral power and elevation, which I have set before you as the supreme good of our nature.

According to these views, the first duty of a statesman is to build up the moral energy of a people. This is their first interest; and he who weakens it inflicts an injury which no talent can repair; nor should any splendor of services, or any momentary success, avert from him the infamy which he has earned. Let public men learn to think more reverently of their function. Let them feel that they are touching more vital interests than property. Let them fear nothing so much as to sap the moral convictions of a people by unrighteous legislation or a selfish policy. Let them cultivate in themselves the spirit of. . . virtue, as the first requisite to public station. Let no apparent advantage to the community, any more than to themselves,

seduce them to the infraction of any moral law. Let them put faith in virtue  
as the strength of nations. (pp. 178, 183 – 184) END

**SECOND READING**

Mary Oliver *Poem* from Dream Work, p. 52-53

The spirit

likes to dress up like this:

ten fingers,

ten toes,

shoulders and all the rest

at night

in the black branches,

in the morning

in the blue branches

of the world.

It could float, of course,

but would rather

plumb rough matter.

Airy and shapeless thing,

it needs

the metaphor of the body,

lime and appetite,  
the oceanic fluids;  
it needs the body's world,  
instinct  
and imagination  
and the dark hug of time,  
sweetness,  
and tangibility,  
to be understood,  
to be more than pure light  
that burns  
where no one is---  
so it enters us---  
in the morning  
shines from brute comfort  
like a stitch of lightning;  
and at night  
lights up the deep and wondrous

drownings of the body

like a star. (END)

#### **SERMON: Spiritual Freedom**

First, let me bring greetings from the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, where we have had a liberal religious presence for 109 years—not long by Baltimore standards, but impressive when we imagine 32 people gathering in 1899 to start a liberal church in that frontier setting.

And then let me express my gratitude at being invited here to preach on this Union Sunday, and to preach from this pulpit where Channing preached the Ordination Sermon of Jered Sparks so long ago. I am thrilled to be here today. With thanks to the Reverend Phillis Hubbell and John Parker Manwell for their hospitality and welcome.

I chose the text from Channing's sermon *Spiritual Freedom* in part because it speaks of statesmen and government, and what undergirds their purposes (which I thought would be timely in our time of national elections) and in part because I consider *Spiritual Freedom* one of the primary ends

of our Unitarian Universalist faith—and how we work in the worlds of government and power in these vital times.

There has been some confusion among us, in recent years, about how we Unitarian Universalists can be effective agents for change in public policy, in global economics, even in our own cities and towns. We work hard on our study resolutions for General Assembly. Almost all, if not all of our churches have Social Action groups, and Community Service groups, and then specific groups for targeted action—working for the environment, or ‘the right to marry’, or to volunteer at Habitat, or to participate in community organizing. We go to General Assembly with our study resolutions in hand, and craft statements of witness to the issues of the time. We devote our Adult Education classes to learning and struggling with our own ability to be open, to welcome differences, to help expand liberty’s cause in the public square. And we work as individuals in our own small ways to live committed lives so that we will leave the world a better place than when we arrived.

But as the days turn into years, and years into decades, it is hard to see the results of our efforts. The Peace Activists I know, are struggling now with the reality of the war in Iraq, the genocide in Darfur, the seeming intractable tendency of humanity *to turn on itself* in brutality and carnage, with each generation bearing its own labels for the violent sacrifice of its young and innocent in war.

And then there is the difficulty we feel in our churches of maintaining the line of separation between church and state—a line made clear by (of all things) the Internal Revenue Service, and their rules against lobbying for or against candidates—and the attendant question on the side of people attending on Sundays about whether public policy issues are appropriate topics for Sunday sermons.

(I might parenthetically mention here that there is also confusion among us about our own elections, coming up in 2009. One of my supporters reported that he was told “it was not appropriate” to speak of my candidacy in a Minister’s meeting—mixing, I think, the *prohibition against* speaking of candidates for national office in church, with the *imperative to speak* about candidates for leadership in our Association.)

When I arrived at First Unitarian Church in Dallas, 21 years ago, I found that there had been two congregational votes about public policy in the previous six months—one on whether to become a Nuclear Free Zone, and the other on whether to become a Sanctuary congregation for refugees from Central and South America. Both votes had failed by a small margin. Feelings were running high.

When I did some inquiry about the votes, I found that they had failed because the people who were against the issues had (perhaps unknowingly) aligned themselves with the people who believed the congregation shouldn’t take such votes, tipping the balance of the result to the “no” side in both cases.

I was quite frankly asked about what I thought of such votes when I was in candidating week. I had to do some hard thinking.

I looked to three places for an answer: The history of the church in Dallas, our history as Unitarian and Universalists, and to the work of the people in the church at the time.

Robert Raible, who was the minister of First Church, Dallas, for 22 years had believed that the church should not have such public policy votes because it diminished the diversity of opinion within the church. He also felt that it lured people into feeling they had done something about an issue, when they had only satisfied their own opinion. Older members of the church who remembered his tireless work during the desegregation of the schools in Dallas, also remembered arguing with him about having the church take a stand, which he did not think was an effective action. One member, Hardy Sanders, a tireless worker in the public square for effective and compassionate government reported that as a young man with ‘fire in the belly’ for social change he argued with Rev. Raible. Hardy told me, “In the end I realized he was right. We accomplished much more and avoided the risk of establishing a social creed in the place of a religious creed in our church.

Later when the women of the Day Alliance at First Unitarian were to take up the issue of abortion as their study issues, found the need to reform the Texas law on the issue—they reached beyond the church walls to form a coalition with the Jewish Sisterhood, and other women’s groups

to lobby for reform. That coalition of women's groups, (much to their surprise, I might add) took the issue of a woman's right to privacy (I emphasize that for them it was an issue of privacy) – took that issue all the way to the Supreme Court in what is now known as *Roe v. Wade*.

Today when I talk about the church's role in the changing of public policy and compassionate action, please do not misunderstand. I believe we have an important role. How we go about fulfilling our role has been confused in recent years. Today I wish to bring some clarity to our so that our *focus on words* to describe the problem *and our crafting of words about the resolution* of the problem, will instead become *action for effective change*.

First, let me remind us all that the generation which preceded us in this work believed in the centrality of institutions. These days Institutions are often considered *impediments* to change—we treat them as bureaucracies which need to be circumvented for any real change to happen.

But, I'm sure you know this—we are gathered in an Institution at this moment—an institution committed to the uplifting of the human spirit, the freedom of all, and service to humankind. It is only one example of what we have received, as heritage from people who saw institutions as the visible embodiment of values and purposes that would fade away if not formed for the generations to come.

On this celebration of the bicentennial year of Enoch Pratt's birth, we have only to look at his life as a classic example of the belief that institutions would be the agents of change in a world of social distress. Enoch Pratt, who among all his gifts to this church, also created the public library system in Baltimore. He could never have imagined the Internet, and knowledge transfer in a cyberspace world—nor could he have imagined libraries which would give anyone who wanted it, free access to the cyberspace world. But he did imagine a library which was available to every person—whatever class or station, religion, ethnicity, or gender—a radical idea which has changed more lives than we can imagine. A tangible embodiment for the generations. And today it is that library which gives even internet access to anyone who walks through its doors.

Pratt not only founded a library here in Baltimore, but was a generous contributor to the founding of what is now the Maryland School for the Deaf in Frederick. He was concerned about the training of Unitarian Ministers and gave a legacy gift to Meadville-Lombard Theological School after the death of his wife.

Unitarians and Universalists who believed Institutions were the agent of change founded Universities, Theological Schools, Libraries, Hospitals, Homes for the Aged, and more recently, The League of Women Voters, Interfaith Community Organizing groups (First church Dallas was a founding member of Dallas Area Interfaith, a coalition which has empowered neighborhood leadership to institute real change in Dallas)

food pantries and job referral services ( we were founding members of North Dallas Shared Ministries) to say nothing of Project Harvest Hope, founded by Unitarian Universalists to help Transylvanian Unitarians achieve economic sustainability, and the Holdeen Trust involvement in micro-lending projects in India. I could go on.

My point being that we need to once again, claim the power of institutions to change the world—not as incidental places to meet—but as a real force for good, to be valued and sustained in the generations to come. Enoch Pratt is revered not only for his gifts, but for his vision of possibility embedded in institutions which could carry forward his vision.

Pratt came to Baltimore in 1831, the year after Channing delivered his sermon *Spiritual Freedom* in Massachusetts. Channing was wary of Institutions from the very beginning—even though his famous sermon from this pulpit on *Unitarian Christianity* gave voice to an idea that would result in the formation of the American Unitarian Association. But if he was wary of institutions, he was clear on what they needed to embody, both in the public square and in the religious sanctuary. Like his predecessors in the liberal clergy and in the early formation of our government, he believed that no form or function of society would last long or serve noble purposes if it was not undergirded with *virtue*.

Virtue for them, was not some stuffy, life-diminishing bow to political correctness. It was a vital, spiritual force that would compel leaders to

make decisions beyond self-interest, make policies for those beyond narrow constituencies, and take actions beyond a rigid nationalism.

Virtue for Adams and Jefferson, for example, was part of a three-legged stool which would support the democracy. One leg was education, one leg was the law, and one leg was virtue. Education would be supported by educational institutions, the law would be supported by the judicial system, and virtue would be supported by institutional religion.

They believed that one of the most important functions of the church in the public square was to create a people who valued good and noble purposes—Channing saw that as spiritual freedom. Out of spiritual freedom would come the moral energy to (in his words) “touch...more vital interests than property. . . and create the strength of the nation.”

Through religion, people would look upon the universe as “pervaded, quickened, and vitally joined into one harmonious and beneficent whole by God’s ever-present and omnipotent love,” making the mind free.

It is also in this sermon that William Ellery Channing writes the passage “I call that mind free” which we have in our hymnbooks. It is an eloquent and enduring statement of one of the pillars of our faith. But the next time you read it, remember that Channing was writing about the freedom of the mind and spirit in the service of political freedom—undergirding all our work to change social structures and build vital institutions to be agents of change.

So what is the role of the church, the role of the institutional church as we understand it in our Unitarian Universalist Congregations when it comes to challenging our political and social structures, and in our oft-quoted goal, “to make the world a better place.”

Let me simply quote one of the members of my church, now retired and living in Chicago. Duane Dowell is a Doctor. Has spent most of his practice in public health—working in Haiti at the Hopital Albert Schweitzer, working at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, directing school based clinics—which as you can imagine is a complicated job.

One day he said to me in passing, “I come to church to remember why I do what I do during the week.”

I took that to mean that he needed to realign his values and purpose which most likely had been beaten up and trampled down during the week—he needed to realign his values and purpose to go out another week to do work which might not, at least in his time, might not show much reward.

For this is the real test of our spiritual freedom. Do we have the depth of spirit to take on the intractable questions, the difficult situations, the issues with no apparent answer, and live into them day after day and week after week, without becoming rigid, without building orthodoxies of our own about what is right to do. Without limiting a range of responses to the issue. Without limiting our work to our own small group, or only to those who agree with us on every issue?

Channing's *Spiritual Freedom* was an expansive practice, an enlarging way of being, an openness to possibilities, even when none were apparent. Channing's *Spiritual Freedom* needed Institutional embodiment, even as he understood the limitations of institutional structures that did not have a foundation of moral virtue—a quality fostered in the heart, over years of practice and living.

So what is there for us to do in our time?

First, like Enoch Pratt, wealthy or not, we need to take our treasure and use it, not only to take care of ourselves and our families, but to take care of the institutions given us by those who went before. Our free churches and public schools, our open libraries and our theological schools. We need to worry about the education of our young, and the training of our ministers, among other concerns. And to join with others, even those with whom we might not be fully aligned, to create strong institutions which serve all the people.

Second: It's our turn to name the values and virtues which are important to recall, no matter how intransigent the problems we face. To practice them. To teach them. To understand them as qualities to be lived in the midst of ambiguity. Qualities to be lived in the midst of ambiguity and forgiveness. Without this return to the large values and virtues which were at the foundation of our Unitarian and Universalist beginnings—and without our reclamation of the larger vision we will become a tiny voice, barely audible in our time.

And third: To come to church to be reminded why we are doing what we are doing. There are enough issues to discuss all the other days of the week. What we need to do is come to church to be reminded why we are doing what we are doing. And to rededicate ourselves to the purposes to which we are called.

And if you don't know your own calling in this world of pressing need, memorize the poem read earlier by Mary Oliver. Simply called "Poem" from her book Dream World. You are an incarnation of justice and freedom and forgiveness—for a brief time, it must be said. And very busy with your life, it must be said. But still, an embodiment of "Spiritual Freedom" – the kind that creates the foundation for good government, responsive society, open education, and love.

May you go forth, empowered by faith, to transform the world. AMEN.

#### CLOSING WORDS

May our steps be fixed that we stagger not  
at the uneven motions of the world  
But go steadily on our way  
Neither censuring our journey for the weather we meet  
Nor turning aside for anything that may befall us.

