

“Concord”

a sermon preached by Rev. David Carl Olson

First Unitarian Church of Baltimore
October 18, 2009

It is a quite wonderful time of year. The indicators have been here for a while: a morning when the dew is especially thick, the air crisper than it had been before, more of the leaves having turned and, even, falling to earth. It is my day off, I remember, thankfully, and it is a time I may roam. It is the time for picking up a peck of apples. (Not peck of pickled peppers—but a quarter-bushel of fresh apples.

When I lived in Michigan, this meant a short drive to Wolcott’s, an apple orchard in Mt. Morris township, a small suburb north of Flint, the same place where the Genesee County Conservation District tree sale is held each fall, where I bought ten forsythia and a red bud bush, scrawny little samples now branching out into real bushes in the back yard.

I get to Wolcott’s a little early in the season to buy honey crisps, those sweet and especially juicy, pink fleshed apples that have become especially popular lately. They don’t store well, in my experience, and they taste so good and sweet when crisp and fresh; and I always buy at least a peck when I get to Wolcott’s at the start of apple season.

But when I lived in Boston, the drive to purchase apples—no longer to pick them, alas, as I did in the autumns of my college years, but just to buy—was to drive out to Concord, Massachusetts to one of several orchards, and there I would buy sometimes a peck, sometimes a half-bushel, infrequently a full bushel of crisp and tart apples, McIntosh or

Macouns or even Granny Smiths, apples whose fragrance would fill my ancient car with an intoxicating aroma that assured me that autumn was indeed here.

At church on the Sunday following that Friday day off, instead of flowers up front we’d have a big basket of apples, some colorful maple leaves, maybe a few branches from a curly willow, maybe a bowl of nuts. We’d welcome the children forward and offer them an apple to take-with to class; a mom or a grandpa might take an apple, too. And we’d invariably tell that beautiful story about the star in the center of every apple, and the youngest and the eldest will be shocked for a moment in wonder: is there a star in the middle of me?

The drive from the Back Bay to Concord is one that winds by Harvard Square, following the sometimes congested roads on either side of the Charles River, swinging wide to pass Mt. Auburn cemetery where the monuments of Julia Ward Howe and Charles Bulfinch, Amy Lowell and Buckminster Fuller, Bernard Malamud and Oliver Wendell Holmes grace the planned landscape of beautiful vistas and thoughtful works of art. Then to the highway, to route 2 as it rushes you out of north Cambridge, a funny kind of brief highway of four lanes in each direction that speeds you for only a few minutes out to “America’s Technology Highway,” the circular road around Boston that is a little bit of route 95 and part Interstate 93, but which everyone calls by its state highway number, 128.

Staying off 128 but instead still following route 2, now down to its two-lanes in each direction more normal size, I take the road that passes around Concord center and goes, instead, into West Concord on the way to Acton and Stow. There I find the several

orchards where apples may be picked or perused; where I might make my purchase and finally declare in my bones, “Autumn is upon us.”

Concord, Massachusetts was the birthplace of many writings by American authors who were also Unitarian luminaries. I bet all of us have read Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, or other selections of his writings; many, too, will have read Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* or the works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne or Ralph Waldo Emerson. These were the days when the Unitarian faith was called “the Boston Religion,” and the thinkers who listened to the likes of William Ellery Channing and his ministerial cohort were encouraged to imagine that each soul was innately curious, that our aim in education was not to establish rules learned by rote but instead to share eternal truths which would resonate with each listening heart.

In his essay, “Self-Reliance,” we find an Emerson that speaks, I think, to the heart of every college student. How true it feels when he says, “I must be myself.” How radical and affirming to the developing mind when he asserts, “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think.” And for those who are afraid of the hypocrisy of holding incomplete or even competing positions, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” Emerson becomes the basis for an assertion of an American way of thinking not dependent on the tutelage of distant thinkers and foreign thought, but homespun and glorious, and intuitively known to be the equal of any other.

These American thinkers were often not orthodox in their beliefs. Orthodoxy and

orthopraxis, that is “right speaking and right acting,” had been asserted—even among the free churches of New England who placed all authority in the congregation—as adherence to the old authorities of the Bible and ecclesiastical councils. Emerson and other non-Orthodox thinkers found a new locus of authority; it was the authority of the unfettered human heart. And proof of the authority was found in the intuition of each person, and the proof by practice of their works. The Bible where it were true became true not because of the authority of tradition, but because each listener hear truth in it (where they did). And the proof was found in the honest lives lived by those who were sufficiently present to self to know the universal truths which were intuitively innately present.

Emerson: “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

The great woman lives, in the midst of the crowd, the life that she knows in her solitude is the true life for her. This might be a reason that we come to church, to find the solitude—to feel the solitude—of our selves in the midst of the crowd; and then, with the crowd, to step forward into the lives each of us must live. This thinking is at the heart of the grand 19th century downtown Unitarian church. That a people may gather to listen for the truths of

their own hearts; that they may react to the moral instruction of the community—its songs and its prayers and its preaching—and then that they may apply the moral instruction given to each heart as each heart hears it; and that then to go into the world to live lives consistent with truths known; this is the essential meaning of the establishment of the civic church. For nearly two hundred years, this congregation on this corner has striven to fill the hearts of the free thinkers of Baltimore with echoes of the true each heart intuit. For nearly two hundred years, this pulpit has asked you to know yourself, to know your own greatness and your own meanness, and to choose your own greatness, for your good and for the good of us all.

Emerson understands that there will be challenges in this winnowing of greatness and meanness; there will be unevenness in our understanding and in our personal and shared progress. Be not afraid. Emerson: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Out upon your guarded lips! Sew them up with pockthread, do. Else if you would be a man speak what you think today in words as hard as cannon balls, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.

“Ah, then, exclaim the aged ladies, you shall be sure to be misunderstood! Misunderstood! It is a right fool's word. Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be

misunderstood.”

This pulpit has not asked you to be full of confusion in your heart. Rather, I think, it has asked you to dig deeply into what you know. Not what you have memorized; not what your analysis of all that is in space and time concludes; but what, in your deepest heart, in your finest conviction, is calling you, is pushing you, is welcoming you to know and be and do. As we are all learning, growing, transforming as we live our lives, we are unafraid to follow the confusing lead of our heart. We understand and we misunderstand; and when we would be great, we act boldly on our deepest conviction.

Our understandings and our actions are ephemeral; they are here one moment and then they pass away. This moment we share will never be shared again. It is ephemeral and we are ephemeral. But there is a truth, an honorable truth, that outlives all of us. It may have been here before we understood it; it may be here long after we are gone; but our lives strive for something larger, something greater; something ancient and true not because an ancient authority gave it to us, but because we, in living just now, just here, understand intuitively that is it a noble sentiment of honorable estate.

Emerson: “Honor is venerable to us because it is no ephemeris. It is always ancient virtue. We worship it today because it is not of today. We love it and pay it homage because it is not a trap for our love and homage, but is self-dependent, self-derived, and therefore of an old and immaculate pedigree, even if shown in a young person.”

Emerson speaks to that young radical in each of us who wants to see the world in her own terms. That teenager in us, that young

adult in us, asserts that this moment contains the new revelation for humanity. And does it not? Is it not true that this very new moment for us is the moment in which the whole of creation is being transformed? That this people, in this place, is transforming everything that is?

This, too, is the story of this pulpit. This is and will always be the Independent community, free-standing, declaring its power and making its promise in and to the world. This is and always will be the Unitarian community which sees a oneness in all of life, that asserts that we are and have always been deep in our intuition one people in spite of all the surface truths may assert of our differences. This is and will always be the Universalist community that knows that a universal Love is at work in us and in all to bring us into harmony.

Yes, this is a musical moment. In a life which pulses with the music of discord, it is here in this place that we pause; that we still ourselves; that we listen not for the truth from a pulpit or a prayer or a song, but for the truth that comes from our hearts, a truth that might be magnified by a preacher, or pointed at by a prayer, or described in a hymn or in the great concord of our music; but it is true because we know it in our hearts.

And not just for our heart-knowing, but for our action in the world. Emerson: "Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means to effect a private end is theft and meanness. It supposes duality and not unity in nature and consciousness. As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action. The prayer of the

farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar, are true prayers heard throughout nature, though for cheap ends."

We leave this place to enter a world where we see a world that wants our participation. In the actions of our congregation and the other congregations with which we associate. In our actions in the creation of community organizations and centers for voluntary action which will reform our society in manners consistent with the deep truths we know. In our work for justice in the places where our power can make a real difference.

We can act together to make a difference in this city. That is long the message of this pulpit, the aspiration of this community. We will move forward in the truth that we have apprehended here; the truth known in our hearts and reflected in the workings of this community; the truth which our situation calls us to move toward. The powerful truth which is confirmed in the longings of each soul.

I close with Emerson: "I must be myself. I will not hide my tastes or aversions. I will so trust that what is deep is holy, that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me and the heart appoints. If you are noble, I will love you; if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions. If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. I do this not selfishly but humbly and truly. It is alike your interest, and mine, and all [women's and] men's, however long we have dwelt in lies, to live in truth.

May it ever be. Blessed be. Ashe, ashe. Amen.