



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Deepening Our Faith

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I want first of all to thank Toni LeBel for all her work as the primary organizer of the fellowship dinner last night. We had a wonderful time and it was another good lesson about what a terrific congregation this is and how important it is that we gather together for more than just worship. And also to thank all the hosts and hostesses, and JD Roberto for the terrific video and Ned Racine for photos; Clyde Derrick for piano; Alan Freeman for gathering some funny folks to speak, for everyone who came and brought food and pitched in to clean up. And to the canvass Committee – Kevin Kroeker and Lynn Miyamoto, Lori Dillman, Janice Partyka, Helen Stapenhorst. And the board led by Frank Colcord, and to whomever I have forgotten – THANK YOU!

This last week I was in Santa Barbara for the senior ministers of large UU congregations' annual retreat and program. I go every year; this is my peer group, and it is always worth the time. In the cycle of the church year, this is the time ministers start to drag, and so getting away for renewal is a good thing. Every time I go, I come away with confidence in the future of our faith – my colleagues in that group are really excellent and skilled and we represent over a third of all the UUs in the country in our congregations.

We go there both to learn and to rest – we stay at La Casa de Maria, a Catholic retreat center in Montecito – where I will lead a spiritual retreat in the Fall for us. The program was led by Rev Rob Hardies, who serves our church in Washington, DC, All Souls – where A Powell Davies was minister in the 1950s - and the program focused on the devotional practices of Unitarians in the early 1800s – the time of Channing and Emerson and Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker and Elizabeth Peabody – the transcendentalists. This was the golden era of Unitarianism.

And perhaps the central figure in that era was William Ellery Channing who served a church in Boston from 1803 to 1842. 39 years! I will be 97 if I served Neighborhood that long – my oh my!

After graduating from Harvard College, and before he entered the ministry, William Ellery Channing spent several years in Richmond as a tutor in the family of one of the Randolph clan. Channing had grown up in Rhode Island and gone west to Harvard. His childhood had not been, apparently, very happy, for he reacted negatively to the Calvinism of his time and of his family.

In Virginia, Channing underwent a crisis. His health began to fail and that became a battle for him the rest of his life. But he also underwent a spiritual crisis. This is how he described it later in his life:

There [in Richmond] I toiled as I have never done since, for gradually my constitution sank under the unremitting exertion. With not a human being to whom I could communicate my deepest thoughts and feelings, and shrinking from common society, I passed through intellectual and moral conflicts, through excitements of heart and mind, so absorbing as often to banish sleep, and to destroy almost wholly the power of digestion. I was worn well-nigh to a skeleton. Yet I look back on those days and nights of loneliness and frequent gloom with thankfulness. If I ever struggled with my whole soul for purity, truth and goodness, it was there. There, amidst sore trials, the great question, I trust, was settled within me, whether I would obey the higher or lower principles of my nature - whether I would be the victim of passion, the world, or the free child and servant of God.'

Channing did not leave that question hanging. In a famous talk about the inherent divinity of the individual, he said that life is the opportunity to grow a soul and that our lives are life-long conversions to the truth. Throughout his life, by how he lived and by the expressions of his ever developing faith, he attempted to answer the question - whether he would obey the higher or the lower principles of his nature, whether he would be obedient to the world or to God.

That question of Channing's - what or whom do we obey, to what do we pledge our loyalty, what is of

ultimate value to us is our question as well. The questions of how we are to live and according to what values? We come here seeking a better life. We come here – we are saying in our canvass – to deepen our roots, to seek a life of consequence, to live a life worth living, and together create the beloved community.

How many here grew up as UUs? Not many. Most of us left another tradition or no tradition to come here, and perhaps felt a bit like Channing – alone with our questions about meaning and religion and coming here, hoping to find rich soil in which to grow deeper roots.

My homily today is sort of a teaser for what I hope to share with you this year and next, and perhaps until I am 97. It is to explore more deeply the richness of our history, so that it doesn't feel like we are just making this all up as we go along. Our faith has roots, deep roots, and they are worth knowing.

'We are all drawn to the same craters of the spirit, drawn to both the pain of our loneliness and of our relationships, led forward by the promise of hope and love. And we come, sometimes, with empty arms, sometimes with full hearts. But, everyone, at some point in life, is drawn to that crater, wondering whether there is a way out or only a way in.'

So writes Saul Bellow in his novel *'The Dangling Man'*. We are drawn on the same craters of the spirit. And because Bellow is right, I believe, we come here. Here, to what we might call a redemptive community, a beloved community. Here we address that question of Channing's and here, that crater of the spirit.

The survey we completed last year stated that we seek a deeper sense of community and a deeper sense of the spirit. If we explore how to deepen our spiritual life, the other will follow – the ties within our community will be deeper. If we explore our faith's tradition and explore the spiritual, a closer and deeper community will be the result. They go hand in hand.

Week after week, year after year, the members and friends of Unitarian Universalist congregations meet. We come in different ways and for many different things - but above all, we come to find and deepen our faith. We come because we feel a need to be together - to gather strength from each other, to lend our strength to those we care about. We are here to seek deeper meaning to our lives; we are here to worship - to call forth that which is holy and which might bring us closer together. We believe in certain things - like love and justice and peace and fairness. We believe that those things can be found here. We hope, some of us, that the sacred might show her face to us here, that grace might illuminate our lives.

We recognize that our lives go through changes; we are babes, then we are children; we grow up and we die. We learn that most of our fears will not hurt us; we learn courage; we learn that joy can become deeper and deeper in life. We learn that the world goes through seasons and changes.

I would like to suggest that whatever you are looking for, it can be found here - whether it is in the stirring of your own heart or in this vital and creative community. It can be found here in the silences we share; in the way we invite the spirit to enter this room each Sunday morning; it is found here in the support you lend each other; it is found in the gifts you share with each other; it is found in your vision of who you can be.

Channing lived in a world filled with fewer ambiguities than ours. We are certainly living in the era of relativism; there are few authorities any more and we seem to be living on the edge - of what we do not always know. Life has always been uncertain, to be sure, but there is a lack of a center it seems that was not so apparent before.

But Channing also experienced sorrow and uncertainty; his son died young; his congregation turned on him for his abolitionist position. He never lost his belief, however, in human possibility and in the healing resources of a human community.

Some years back, Ken MacLean, former minister at Cedar Lane Unitarian Church in Bethesda and an important mentor of mine, told me that congregations were like vessels into which people poured their lives. Our tasks as ministers, Ken said, was to tend to the vessels so that people would not fall through the cracks that inevitably are a part of any human institution. Ken told me that, in that vessel, are all the sources for healing, for support, for meaning, for happiness, that anyone might need.

And as Ken knew, it is a job that belongs to all of us, not just to the ordained clergy. For this vessel is ours. Its care, as Channing well knew, lay in the common purpose of its members; its care is in the hands of those who are willing to commit to its common ends, to the redemption of all that is broken in our lives.

Deepening our roots – yes indeedy – so we can stand tall and be strong.