

“Where Giants Lead”

CHANNING, EMERSON, PARKER

Delivered at the Unitarian Society of Germantown

January 27, 2008

[Editorial Disclaimer: While the concepts and words quoted from Channing, Emerson and Parker are theirs, significant editing and changing have been made for flow and continuity and to reflect the style of modern speeches and thought.....to truly understand their meaning the exact sermons should be studied. Because this published document is a copy of the sermon as delivered, no attempt has been made to restore the original words or proper punctuation.]

I must begin by asking for forgiveness if any has come here this morning under any misapprehension because of

the meaning of the title of this sermon displayed on our modest sign on Lincoln Drive. This title “Where Giants Lead” will offer no insight; will not make any prediction, about whether the Giants will beat the Patriots in the Superbowl. The title was chosen at a time when we still hoped it would be the Eagles playing next Sunday. [That tells you how long ago that was] The Giants referred to are Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker, giants who created modern Unitarianism.

Because of these giant thinkers, we Unitarians-Universalists celebrate diversity. Through this celebration we can lead to salvation the whole technologically shrinking, increasingly intolerant world engulfed in religious warfare.

Our Unitarian beliefs, which find inspiration in the wisdom of all the world’s religions, can be summarized in

the words of Joseph Campbell who said, “All religions are true metaphorically.” “...Religions go wrong when then seek to enforce literal or historical acceptance”.

While studying the Grail Legend of the King Arthur myths I realized that our Holy Unitarian Grail is the revelation that every sincere spiritual path is the path to enlightenment and it is better and holy to walk that path in church communion.

In my spiritual path I try to understand the truth of the metaphoric images of every religious tradition. So when I have occasion to be at a different service I try to appreciate the metaphoric truth of the ritual. Yet, at the funeral of a colleague who died too young after a heroic battle with cancer, I could not join in singing one hymn. The tune was reminiscent of hymns we sing here and not difficult or

terribly unfamiliar. I had no difficulty following the music; but the words, the words.....

My colleague was an African-American Judge and the funeral was in a north Philadelphia Church. Most parishioners in that totally packed Church were black, but the rows reserved for dignitaries were well integrated. As the hymn began, the church filled with heartfelt song to the lord, including the voices of many of my black Judge colleagues. But even the non-Jewish, non-Unitarian, white Judges, were not joining in. The words, the words.....

I do not know the hymn, I am not quoting the words, but the import was this: “Jesus our lord by the blood draining from your body and the thorns on your brow, as you writhe in the grasp of your earthly agony and grief, sheared by nails in your flesh, we who do not deserve your forgiveness, thank heaven for your gifts.”

I silently asked myself how could I readily accept foreign esoteric beliefs, and participate in unfamiliar mystery ritual with equanimity, but could not bring myself to join in a familiar mythic representation, sung with dramatic clarity? I could only see the passion of Christ as metaphor when it was sanitized with an impenetrable layer of sophistication. Self-reflecting in that swaying church, I realized that the Christ image was too near, the metaphor too raw. The society in which I had grown treated this metaphor as history and by dogmatic thought insisted that this metaphor was fact, and the only true religion. The song of western civilization blocked my ability to transcend the image and appreciate the metaphoric truth of this one of many “true” religions. I was unable to enter the mystery revealed by this too raw verbal interpretation in song.

But with this psychological realization, I was able to see this Son of God who in the Gospels calls himself the “son of man”, and his wooden cross, as the metaphor for each of us in this tree of life, the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the center of the universe, the bodhi tree under which Buddha sat, representing the truth that each of us can reach her spiritual center even in the depths of despair as her heart cries out: “Lord, why has thou forsaken me?”

And with this psychological realization I was able to join in singing the rest of the hymn about Jesus bleeding on the cross.

It is difficult to appreciate the truth of the metaphor of every religion. It is difficult to find the metaphor within the song of civilization. And yet, of all the religions of the

world only Unitarian-Universalists proclaim that we find sustenance from direct experience of transcending mystery from the wisdom of all worlds' religions.

How did we get to this Universal faith? Where do we go in this difficult world of the 21st century? I invite you to participate in the programs this church is offering exploring these issues. In your pew are brochures listing adult religious education courses. Consider the UU history course, or come to UU 101 or UU102 free flowing discussions of our history and our principles. Recently Rev. Mathies offered a full course on Theodore Parker's Sermon: The transient and the permanent in Christianity, one of the three sermons I will discuss this morning. Watch for him to repeat that program.

All religion was fundamentalists in the 19th century. All religion proclaimed the exclusionary truth of a single interpretation of the word of god, and one exclusive name for god. In America, that truth was the literal interpretation of four gospels and that name was Jesus. Imagine that world as I steal the words of Channing, Emerson, and Parker, edited for our times and for effect. Notice both their revolutionary inspiration and how they are rooted in that Christian tradition.

Ellery Channing, a Christian Unitarian Minister denied the claim that faith excludes Reason, a claim that unbelievably can still be heard today. He accepted the Bible as the word of God but taught that God's gift of reason was proper and necessary to understand the Bible, a book not of history but of poetry and metaphor.

Rev. Ellery Channing, Boston, May 5, 1819

“We regard the scriptures as the record of God’s successive revelation to mankind and particularly of the last and most perfect revelation of his will by Jesus Christ. Our leading principle is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that it’s meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books. We believe that God, when he speaks to the human race, conforms...to the established rules of speaking and writing. Now all books, and all conversation, require in the reader or hearer the constant exercise of reason.

We profess not to know a book, which demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible, its style nowhere affects the precision of science, nor the accuracy of definition. Its language is singularly glowing, bold, and figurative, demanding frequent departures from the literal

sense...and consequently demanding the continual exercise of judgment.

We find, too, that the different portions of this book, instead of being confined to general truths, refer perpetually to the times when they were written, to states of society, to modes of thinking, to feelings and usages which have passed away, and without the knowledge of which we are constantly in danger of extending to all times, and places, what was of temporary and local application.... We feel it our duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known, for explaining what is difficult, and for discovering new truths.

We honor revelation too highly to make it the antagonist of reason, or to believe that it calls us to renounce our highest powers.

God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it... Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings...it is the part of wisdom to interpret it by the help of all the faculties.

Jesus, in his preaching, continually spoke of God. The word was always in his mouth. We ask, does he, by this word, ever mean himself? We say, never... It is our duty to explain such texts by the rule which we apply to other texts in which human beings are called gods.”

Channing taught that the truth of the Christ metaphor must be understood, not mummified. That the truth of Christianity is revealed not obscured, by all other knowledge including the texts, of other religions “in which

human beings are called gods”. Understanding and living the word of the Lord revealed in the Bible is a continuing human activity not a proclamation of a static unreasoned faith.

Twenty years later the Unitarian Minister Ralph Waldo Emerson went further. God’s revelation did not end with words written in the Middle East. God’s revelation is continuing, right here, every day, as Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas: “The Kingdom of Heaven will not arise by expectation. The Kingdom of Heaven is around us right now, but we do not see it.” And Emerson taught that because revelation is continuing, each of us can learn it by experience and only from experience.

**Rev. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harvard
Divinity School, July 15, 1838**

“All things proceed out of the same spirit of life which is differently named in its different applications, just as the ocean receives different names on the several shores which it washes.”

“[This spirit] is guarded by one stern condition, it is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but only provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word...be he whoever he may, I can accept nothing.”

“The first defect of historical Christianity [is] ...the exaggeration of the personal, the ritual. It has dwelt, it swells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus. The soul knows no person. It invites every man to

expand to the full circle of the universe and will have no preference but those of spontaneous love.” “By his holy thoughts Jesus serves us, and thus only.”

“Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead.”

“The test of the true faith, ...should be its power to charm and command the soul as the laws of nature control the activity of the hands... Faith should blend with the light of rising and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers.”

“[We cannot accept] the stationary religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed, the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man. It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaks today.”

“Once leave your own knowledge of God, your own sentiment, and take secondary knowledge and you get further from God with every year....dare to love God without mediator or veil. Thank God for all good men and prophets but say, “I also am a man” ...cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint at first hand with Deity, live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind.”

“I look to see the world to be the mirror of the soul; to see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and that religion is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy.”

Emerson taught that the works of God, or of the Goddess or of all the Gods was far too great to be contained in words written in the Middle East centuries before. The Bible is no more a revelation than every bud in spring or every birth or every death or every breath. This mystery of

life is a gift of continuing revelation, which we can acknowledge and appreciate. We can see this revelation everywhere with our heart. Emerson asked us to reach beyond the words of the bible to the continuing revelation of experience. All spiritual seeking is the path of the lord.

Three years later, as our country drifted toward civil war, Theodore Parker, a Unitarian hero of that anti-slavery age, left biblical moorings entirely and embraced the universality of religious truth in any name.

Theodore Parker, Boston, May 19, 1841

“While true religion is always the same thing...the religion taught has never been the same thing in any two centuries or lands, except only in name. The differences between sects of Christianity are greater and deeper than that between Jesus and Plato. In all Christianity there are two elements, the one transient, the other permanent. The

one is...the uncertain wisdom [of] theological notions...
the other the eternal truth of god.

“An undue place has often been assigned to forms and doctrines, while too little stress has been laid on the divine life of the soul, love to god, and love to man.

There can be but one religion which is absolutely true, existing in the facts of human nature, and the ideas of infinite god, that, whether acknowledged or not is always the same thing and never changes. So far as a man has any real religion, he has that one religion, by whatever name he may call it. For strictly speaking, there is but one kind of religion, as there is but one kind of love, though the manifestation of this religion, in forms, doctrines, and life, is so diverse. Now while this religion is one and always the same thing, there may be numerous systems of theology or philosophies of religion.

On the authority of the written Word, man was taught to believe impossible legends, conflicting assertions; to take fiction for fact; a dream for a miraculous revelation of God; an oriental poem for a grave history of miraculous events; a collection of amatory idylls.... sketched by some glowing eastern imagination, never intended to be taken for reality, as proof that the Infinite God spoke in human words, appeared in the shape of a cloud, a flaming bush, or a man who ate, and drank, and vanished into smoke; that God gave one counsel today, and the opposite tomorrow; that he violated his own laws; was angry, and was only dissuaded by a mortal man from destroying an entire nation. Almost every sect, that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, and not the immutable truth of the doctrines themselves. Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason why moral and

religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.

To turn away from the disputes of the Catholics and the Protestants, of the Unitarian and the Trinitarian, of Old School and New School, and come to the plain words of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity is a simple thing; very simple. It is absolute, pure Morality; absolute, pure Religion; the love of man; the love of God.... The only form it demands is a divine life; doing the best thing, in the best way, from the highest motives. Its sanction is the voice of God in your heart; the perpetual presence of Him, who made the stars over our head. All this is very simple; a little child can understand it; very beautiful, the loftiest

mind can find nothing so lovely....the whole extent of Christianity so well summed up in the command, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind – thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;” and is there anything therein that can perish?

Were all men Quakers or Catholics, Unitarians or Baptists, there would be much less diversity of thought, character, and life; less of truth active in the world. We never are Christians-as was the Christ, until we worship, as Jesus did, with no mediator, with nothing between us and the Father of all. He felt that God’s word was in him; that he was one with God.

The question puts itself to each man, ‘Will you cling to what is perishing, or embrace what is eternal?’ This question each must answer for himself.”

The Unitarian establishment ostracized Parker because he claimed that the permanent truth of Christ's message did not depend on revelation, did not depend on history, and did not depend on political correctness or any dogma. Christ's moral "Do unto others as you would do unto yourself" is true whether attributed to Christ, Buddha, Krishna, or the beggar who hangs at 15th and Chestnut Street. Parker also denied exclusivity in religion. If there was only one religion he said: "there would be much less diversity of thought, character, and life; less of truth active in the world."

Shattering the medieval Mediterranean bondage imposed by the creeds adopted at the council of Nicea in 324 A.D. these three Unitarian Giants created our church of a free faith.

Over the years, our liberation from religious dogma led us away from the mystery of a continuing divine revelation. The siren song of scientific truth, and the horror of the 20th century world of world war and holocaust led us to an exclusionary human centered rationality. So our first principle: the inherent worth and dignity of each individual, became divorced from the biblical metaphor that we are all created in God's image. And the universal metaphor, which is found in every age in every human community, the metaphor of God herself, was relegated to a shadowy existence. And we lost the concept of Salvation. Reverend Sinkford asks us to rekindle our Unitarian-Universalist language of reverence so we may proclaim the truth of our Giants and speak of the mystery of this world in the language of universal religious truth.

Ours is a difficult faith, which asks us to appreciate the true metaphor of every religion. But of all the religions of the world, only ours proudly demands that we draw spiritual sustenance from all truth.

As globalization, interdependence and climactic transformation further reveal the interdependent web of which we are a part, only this faith can transcend the fallacy of civilization's song.

In the middle of worldwide religious warfare it is hard to see how our celebration of religious diversity can possibly be accepted. But it took a "thirty year war" before Catholic Christian Europe agreed to live with Protestant Christian Europe, and they shared the same mythology of Christ on the cross! Maybe acceptance of our truth will take a century of worldwide disorganization and terror.

But to lead a worldwide religion of acceptance, diversity, and love we must first reclaim the language of reverence, the language of religious metaphor. We need to extend the teachings of our three Unitarian Giants who challenged traditional Christianity. Stepping forth boldly into the future, following their courageous example, we need to embrace their revelation that all religious belief, as metaphor for the unknowable, is as true as all scientific knowledge, and all experience of this mystery of life.

Acceptance will come. Globalization is happening too rapidly, the cataclysm of global warming approaching too quickly to continue warfare over the name of god. The framework exists for the world to hear our saving message.

A catholic teenager from Iowa attends Catholic George Washington University and meets her roommate, a

Hindu girl from India. She learns that her friend is a good and moral person; and that she believes her Hindu faith as sincerely and deeply as does our heroine her catholic faith, that they both have the same dreams of career, success, love and family. Indeed, they even like the same music and dance the same. Of course our Indian child cannot return to India for the Christmas break so she is invited to Iowa.

That Christmas evening, they all celebrate Christ's birth in church as we do here. But we celebrate the miracle of the birth of every child and they proclaim the birth of the only Son of God. At one point mother Catholic calls her child aside and whispers:

“Your friend is very nice, I'm so pleased you've made such a nice friend at school, but dear, please remember she's going to rot in hell for all eternity.”

Suddenly, the old time religion has lost the ring of truth for an entire generation.

Our celebration of diversity distinguishes us from the church around the corner which can use the same welcoming rhetoric but demands that the sentence end with the words: “through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior”, an exclusionary phrase. Our Unitarian-Universalists celebration of diversity unfailingly distinguishes us from all other religions. Our religion, affirms all other religions because we reject any exclusive path, any exclusive name. We say yes to the continuing revelation of life and affirm the universal truth that each of us must take responsibility for our own holy grail, and the sources from which we draw are:

“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.”

Whether you strode here briskly, hobbled in with a cane, skipped in singing, or toddled on little feet you are welcome here. Whatever your race, whatever your heritage, whoever you love, you are welcome here.

Whatever your religious beliefs sincerely and thoughtfully held, and however you struggle with our shared humanity, you are welcome here. By whatever name you call the wonder and mystery of life, you are welcome here; and if you suffer from the delusion of exclusivity, we will help you recover. If you are struggling to appreciate and

experience this mystery, we welcome you to our
community of strugglers for this we know:

We are only dipping our toes into an everlasting, ever-
changing river of life, and in that river the only truth is the
path of the seeker.

So may it be, in a world without end, amen.