

Come with me now on a mind journey to Boston of the mid-1700's. It was a prosperous merchant town, making its money in trade, textiles, tea, and, by-the-way, slaves. It was growing restless with the unenlightened oversight of England. It was considered a backwater by England and Europe, but did not regard itself that way. The ideas of the Enlightenment (1685-1815) were hot topics. Newton's (1642-1726) theories about gravity and motion had made their way across the Atlantic and were stimulating thinking and discussion.

The New England Congregational Church, originating with the Puritans, was the dominant religion. The orthodox theologians of the church still clung to the idea of original sin, the depravity of humans and predestination. This latter was the belief that only a portion of humankind would be saved, and this had been predetermined by God from the beginning. This did not do much for the concept of human free will or the idea of grace.

There was another side to what was happening theologically in Boston. One George Whitefield, an itinerant preacher and skilled orator, began to decry the increasingly ostentatious displays of wealth among the merchants of Boston. He said that the Bostonian merchants were religious in practice but not in spirit. They showed up at church, but he had this to say after his visit to Boston in 1740. "The little infants who were brought to baptism, were wrapped up in such fine things, and so much pains taken to dress them, that one would think they were brought thither to be initiated into, rather than to renounce the pomps [sic] and vanities of this wicked world."<sup>i</sup> Whitefield and others rode the swell of a religious revival, known as the Great Awakening, that swept New England. It encouraged heart knowledge over "head" knowledge. People were converted through an experience of "New Birth."<sup>ii</sup> This was a religious movement as much about class and wealth as anything else; it found great favor among rural folk with less education and far less money.

There were many among the religious establishment who opposed the Great Awakening; Charles Chauncy (1705-1787) became a leader among those who would come to be called Unitarian almost a century later. There were plenty of other dissenters, and other denominations were also born out of this cauldron.

Chauncy was appalled at the lack of reasoning among the leaders of the Great Awakening. He had this to say about Whitefield "who was received by the people 'as though he had been an *Angle of God; yea, a God come down in the Likeness of Man.*'"<sup>iii</sup> As Chauncy hit his stride, his dissent with both the Congregational Church and with the Great Awakening fell into three main categories. 1) Logic and reason were critical in theology; 2) the Bible was the word of God, but required critical and historical analysis; 3) moral aspiration, by which is meant "character building and self-cultivation" (p13), is the focal point of the Christian religion.<sup>iv</sup>

Although Chauncy and his fellow clergy saw themselves as defending the established order against the emotional and theological excesses of the Great Awakening, over time, quite the opposite happened. They defended against the Great Awakening, but came increasingly to disagree with the theology of the Congregational Church. Because of the local governance of the Congregationalist churches, a minister with a congregation that stood with him, could preach pretty much what he wanted about the nature of God and humankind. More and more ministers were preaching "that men are born with the capacity for both sin and righteousness;" we are not born into eternal sin and do not face eternal damnation. They came to be known as the New England Arminians, after the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). After the Great Awakening and the rebuttals to it, the "Standing Order" of the "New England Way," an affiliation of independent churches dating back 100 years, began to unravel.<sup>v</sup>

Over the next 50 years, pulpits, which once used to be shared, became unwelcome places for ministers who were not of like minded theology.<sup>vi</sup> There was a long vacant endowed Hollis Chair of Divinity at Harvard, the college for educating ministers in the Northeast. When that chair was awarded to Henry Ware in 1805, one of those "liberal ministers," the Calvinist ministers of the Congregationalist Church were incensed. Their answer? Found Andover Theological Seminary, where orthodox theology was taught. In 1815, Calvinist by the name of Jedidiah Morse pinned the English term "Unitarian" on the liberal ministers of the Northeast.

By the time Channing gave his famous sermon, Unitarian Christianity in 1819, the two sides weren't talking to each other anymore. And remember, this wasn't a question of whether or not there was God. Both sides believed in God. It was the

nature of God: was God judgmental or was God forgiving. It was the nature of humankind: were we born in sin, were we subject to eternal damnation or could we, through good works, achieve forgiveness. And finally, on the Trinity: it wasn't a question of whether or not Jesus was divine, Jesus was considered divine on both sides of the aisle, it was a question of whether Jesus was equivalent with God, part of a Trinity, sitting at the right hand of God the Father, or whether Jesus was some lesser divine being.<sup>vii</sup>

So Channing gave this sermon at the ordination of Jared Sparks at The First Independent Church of Baltimore on May 5, 1819. He claimed that word, Unitarian, first used by Morse, much as President Obama eventually claimed the name "Obama Care." The ordination was a politically orchestrated event, laying out the theology of the Unitarians. Channing was supported by 18 or 20 like-minded clergy in the sanctuary. My intern supervisor, Chris Bell, alluded to that sermon in his sermon here during my ordination. Chris's sermon went, at most, 20 minutes. Channing's sermon, at 13,000 words, probably lasted at least 2 hours. I think I would probably be speaking to an empty house if I spoke for that long! But I would sure love to write a sermon that had the impact of Channing's. Only 6 years later, in 1825, the American Unitarian Association, the AUA, was formed. Two hundred years later, we study that sermon in seminary. We talk about it in our own sermons.

One might think that things went smoothly after the formation of the AUA. Not so, my friends, not so. The next controversy, the Transcendentalist controversy, began only 7 years later when the newly minted minister and protégé of Henry Ware, Ralph Waldo Emerson, resigned his pulpit at Boston's Second Church. While his resignation was undoubtedly influenced by grief, he had recently lost his beloved wife Ellen, Emerson had also requested that he be excused from administering the Lord's Supper. This was unacceptable to his church and they reluctantly accepted his resignation.<sup>viii</sup>

The Transcendentalist Movement of the early 19th century was a reaction to the prevailing intellectualized spirituality of the Unitarians and Harvard Divinity School and the materialism and commercialism of the day. The Transcendentalists, comprising such Unitarian greats as Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, an early feminist, believed that one could find insight and renewal in contemplating

the beauty and wonder of nature. In fact, it was necessary that one do so. This is why Thoreau went to Walden Pond for two years. His writing influenced environmentalists such as Aldo Leopold and John Muir. The Transcendentalists looked toward nature and Eastern religions for individual insight into the mysteries of creation.

The Transcendentalists did not deny the world of facts, but rather felt that true knowing was to be gained through intuition, which they confusingly called reason. Through intuition, one could transcend sensory knowledge to perceive truth and the genius which lies within each of us and which is connected to God, who is present throughout Nature. They went to Nature to become aware of God. They were mystics, believing in miracle, inspiration and ecstasy.<sup>ix</sup>

The Transcendentalists were heavily influential, both within our denomination and in the world of literature. But their beliefs did not cause a schism, as happened between the Congregationalists and the Unitarians. We call Unitarian Universalism a Living Tradition, because it evolves. The church of Chauncy and the church of Channing would be scarcely recognizable as Unitarian to many of us today. The denomination continued to evolve since Channing's "Unitarian Christianity" sermon. It continues to evolve today, as the humanists among us struggle to accommodate theism among some who now call UU home.

We are a non-creedal church. We don't tell you what to believe. But we do covenant with each other to affirm and promote our Seven Principles. The 3rd of these speaks of encouragement to spiritual growth. Because we also affirm a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, our 4th principle, we understand that spiritual growth does not look the same for each of us. But we are accepting and welcoming.

//May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (UU). Greenwood Press, Westport, CT. 1985. 10

<sup>ii</sup> UU 11.

<sup>iii</sup> UU 9.

<sup>iv</sup> UU 10.

<sup>v</sup> Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, an on-line resource of the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society. The Unitarian Controversy and its Puritan Roots, *Alice Blair Wesley*, [Peter Hughes](#) and [Frank Carpenter](#) - posted October 13, 2000. Retrieved 3/24/17 <http://uudb.org/articles/unitariancontroversy.html>

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> UU

<sup>viii</sup> UU 75.

<sup>ix</sup> K Huff course notes and Barry M. Andrews, *Emerson as Spiritual Guide*, Skinner House, Boston, 2003, 82-83.