

Association Sunday

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Emerson is one of my favorite Unitarian Universalist theologians. I am often drawn to mystics, and Emerson is perhaps one of our greatest. He manages to be deep yet appeals to humanists and theists alike. Of course his prominence in his day and in the history of American letters doesn't hurt. We like being able to claim him as one of ours, even if he did leave the ministry at a young age and proceed to bad-mouth all the Unitarians of his day anytime he had the change. If anything, that makes him all the more relatable to us modern-day Unitarian Universalists! Who else complains about Unitarian Universalism more so than us? In many ways, Emerson is part of our DNA as a religious tradition.

But rhetoric aside, it is Emerson's theology that I am most attracted to. Emerson's point in today's reading is that the same divine insights that flashed through the mind of Jesus are available to us as well. Jesus acted on these insights, he lived them out in a radical way, and people thought he was the son of God. What if we were able to pay attention to these "divine flashes of insight" that pass through our minds? Would we be able to reach the same spiritual level?

Notice that in Emerson's view, all of us have this potential. We are all connected through this sensitivity to what he elsewhere calls the Over-soul, but in the Divinity School Address he used the more traditional term "God." In a sense this is a continuation of Lutheran Protestantism that claimed that every believer had a direct relationship with God unmediated by priest or church. But Emerson differs from Luther in that for Emerson, the church just by its very being interferes in the spiritual freedom of the individual. Normally I find Emerson not only compelling but also quite poetic, and I love reading him in worship. That is except for the Divinity School Address. It is hard to find a good reading in it because he is so fiery, and his rhetoric is so angry, that even through his fantastic nineteenth century prose it comes off a bit edgy for mixed company. If it still feels that way over a century after it was written, imagine what it must have been like sitting in the room as one of the newly minted Harvard graduates about to embark on a career as a Unitarian minister. Or to be one of the faculty! No wonder Emerson was not invited back to Harvard for three decades after this address.

What is Emerson so mad about? Well he is mad at the church. He feels that it has stamped out the individual's sense of self-authenticity. "That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen." Emerson is a perennial individualist. This too is part of our

DNA as Unitarian Universalists, and indeed as Americans. As a mystic that values above all else the experience of the sacred in life, Emerson understands that that experience is deeply personal. It is an experience that cannot be forced onto someone through an institution or through predefined sacraments. Remember that Emerson ostensibly left the Unitarian ministry because he felt he could no longer administer communion to people. For him every moment of life is a sacrament—a moment of being in the presence of the holy.

Thus relationships are secondary to Emerson. The prolific historian of Unitarian Universalism Conrad Wright writes:

“...For Emerson the individual is paramount; the infinity of the individual soul when fully realized makes social relationships trivial; society has nothing to offer in its own right, but only as a stimulus to the individual to recapture that self-sufficiency that will make society irrelevant.

Only a special kind of social relationship appeals to Emerson—one that provides the occasion for stimulating conversation. Ideal society finds exemplification, therefore, in the Transcendental Club early in Emerson’s career, and the Saturday Club, meeting at dinner at the Parker House later on. If we may extrapolate a concept of religious association from that, a church would be a talking club of individualists

mutually stimulating each other to be individualists, or at least to talk like individualists.”

While this might be a compelling vision of the church for some, I think it is pretty unstable.

Individualism, you see, has its limits. It has its benefits to be sure, but there is a point where separate, isolated individuals feel the need to come together and form communities. Indeed this may be a very primal instinct in human beings. But pure individualism both as a philosophy and as a lifestyle is hard to maintain. We have seen this very recently in our national debate over how to address the economic bailout of Wall Street. Last week George W. Bush addressed the nation saying that the government would buy high risk securities that no one else is willing to purchase on the open market, and hold onto them. The federal government, he argued was the only institution capable of doing this. Now I am not a very good economist, and an even worse soothsayer, so I don't know if this will work or not. But notice the argument. George Bush, the free market conservative who believes that deregulating individuals as much as possible is the key to stimulating the economy, revives a plan first utilized in the New Deal. Institutions are more powerful than individuals, and last week we saw a strong individualist like the President come right up to the edge of that philosophy and admit that it has its limits.

The point is that there is a balance that needs to be struck between the individual and the community. Extremes in either direction can be toxic. I believe that the church exists to help people with their spiritual growth and development. We cannot do this solely by ourselves. When I first came to a Unitarian Universalist church I joined a group of young adults called “Twenties and Thirties.” This was a pretty loose group that met once a month to check in, eat pizza, and plan camping trips and things like that together. I think they would go to lunch once a month after church. It was a good group to be a part of. The Ann Arbor congregation back then was a little smaller than we are now, and it was very helpful as a new person to have a sense of community within the larger whole.

One of the big fundraisers for the church then, and probably still, was working a concession stand at University of Michigan football games. It was not terribly impressive; just half a dozen people grilling hamburgers and hotdogs outside the stadium. But business was brisk, and you could make a lot of money at these concession stands. One week I signed up to help. I was the only one from the Twenties and Thirties group to do so. They showed me around and one fellow was behind me grilling the food, and I was to stand at the front and take the orders. All went pretty fine for the first half of the game. Then halftime hit. The stadium at Michigan is called the “Big House”—it seats 109,000 people; more than the population of the city of Ann Arbor. We

got mobbed. What seemed like hundreds of people swarmed around this small concession stand. The guy cooking the hamburgers underestimated how many he would need and had to throw frozen burgers on the grill. These of course took a long time to cook. Meanwhile these people are clamoring for food, and guess who they are clamoring to? In the restaurant business they call that being “in the weeds.” There I was, trying to placate hungry people while at the same time pleading with the laws of physics to cook these frozen bricks of meat as fast as possible.

Well, eventually the game started back up and the crowds gradually dispersed. Some time in the third quarter of the game, we packed up our stuff and watched the fourth quarter from the back. It was a harrowing experience.

The next day at church, my fellow concession stand partners and I commiserated over our recent experience of volunteerism. The next week at coffee hour, I found myself drawn to them again. Then after a while I noticed that only about half of my friends at church were from the young adult group. I knew other people through any number of shared connections and experiences. The UU church had given me opportunities to make new connections to other people; connections that I probably would not have initiated on my own. Working in the trenches at halftime at a University of Michigan football game will create a band of brothers and sisters. I think I really felt like a member of a Unitarian

Universalist church when I experienced the interconnections between myself and my fellow members. It went beyond theology and became a real relationship.

You see while Emerson held a theology of interconnection, that we all have this shared sensitivity to the sacred, you could say that he didn't have a sociology of interconnection. You cultivated your soul on your own, or perhaps by joining a debating society. On the other hand there is Henry Bellows. Bellows had worked during the Civil War as the head of the Sanitation Commission. This was an organization much like the Red Cross, which got started in America shortly after the war. Bellows was the minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York, and in institutionalist to his bones. When he became the President of the American Unitarian Association he reorganized the "National Convention." This meant that the churches that made up the AUA were now in a much more structured relationship with each other. He made the Unitarians into a denomination. Churches were actually in association with each other. Bellows formed an institution of institutions that could exert greater influence and power within American society. He had a vision of interconnection beyond the personal experiences of the mystics. Bellows made interconnection real. He made it happen. With him, Unitarian congregations became interconnected.

Thus we can appreciate the irony in Conrad Wright's observation that Unitarian churches name themselves after Emerson who disliked churches, but no one has ever named a church after Henry Whitney Bellows; despite all he did in the late nineteenth century to bolster and preserve Unitarian congregations. Emerson is a deep part of our DNA as a religious tradition. But maybe Bellows is too, and we are only now beginning to recognize it.

I think Bellows would approve of Association Sunday. This is a day where we recognize and celebrate our participation in the larger Association; the UUA. It is, after all, the successor to Henry Bellows' work. I am a mystic. But I believe that the interconnectedness that mysticism points to cannot be confined to the skin of the individual. This would be a great disservice to the insight that we are all part and parcel of the same universe. Better to be organized, to embody our interconnectedness so that we have some tangible recognition of being in relationship with each other. Our sociology needs to match our theology. It is not always easy. I had to move out of the comfort zone of my small group in Ann Arbor in order to experience the wider relationships of the rest of the church. The same is true of the wider Unitarian Universalist Association. Congregations relate to each other much as members of the same congregation relate to each other; as mutual compatriots working together to make our values real in the world.

This is not to say that we get a long all of the time; just like members of a congregation. Part of our Emersonian DNA is to be critical of the UUA. I know over the past fifteen years I have been, from time to time. It's who we are, and UU ministers are by no means an exception. But I still give to the UUA, to the District, to my alma mater Meadville Lombard, to Chalice Lighters and to Association Sunday. Why? Why give to an organization that you might at times disagree with? So that you can be a pain in their neck! You see if you simply leave a group or don't participate in it, then your views can pretty easily get ignored. But if you are a full participant, you get involved with their activities and give money to their budget, now this group has to listen to you. You are in the ball game. Taking your ball and bat and heading home has never generated real change anywhere. So even when I am upset or don't like something, I have still been known to get involved. Only the people who care enough about the UUA to be critical, and yet still give to it, are going to be the ones to bring about the changes that need to happen. Giving on Association Sunday is not an endorsement of activities. It is a symbol of commitment to that interconnectedness that is there whether we recognize it or not.

How much better it is to recognize our interdependence and to give, not out of spite, but out of a vision for a compelling future for Unitarian Universalism! That is why I am giving this year to Association Sunday. You may or may not be aware that this is an

election year in Unitarian Universalism too. In June of 2009 we will elect a new President of the UUA. Laurel Hallman or Peter Morales will make history next year as either the first female President of the UUA or the first Hispanic President of the UUA. Unitarian Universalism continues to search for a common mission, a sense of itself on the American religious landscape. We have not grown much, but we certainly have not had the precipitous declines that some other denominations have suffered. There are many challenges for Unitarian Universalism in the coming years and decades, but that is all they are: challenges. They are opportunities really. Needed moments in history that gives us the opportunity to rise to the challenge and grow, or to risk our own irrelevance. Association Sunday is a small step perhaps in this grand movement toward the future. But it is an important one. If we are to increase our footprint as a religious movement in American culture and society then we need people who understand the power of institutions. We need people who can invoke the name of Henry Bellows as surely as they do the name of Emerson. When you write your check for Association Sunday, channel your Henry Whitney Bellows DNA that understands that we are more powerful connected than we are apart, and that the UUA represents that very effort.

May we feel the interconnection between ourselves and our fellow human beings. May we live by that insight as often as possible. And

may our Association grow and live up to the fullest of its great potential.
Amen Blessed Be.