

Onward and Upward Forever

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

James Freeman Clarke had a problem. The faith that he loved so much was being torn apart. His family had been instrumental at the beginning of Unitarianism in America. His stepfather and namesake, James Freeman, had been the minister at Kings Chapel in Boston; the very first church in America to break away from the Church of England and embrace Unitarian thinking. The noted Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller was his distant cousin. But only two generations after its separation from the New England Congregationalists, the Unitarians were fighting about their collective identity.

In retrospect, it is a pretty common thing to be fighting about. The question of “Who am I?” or “Who are we?” speaks to our fundamental nature. It is *the* existential question. Specifically the Unitarians were debating their relationship to Christianity. In the early days, everything was easy. We were all Christians, no one disputed this. Taken as a whole, Unitarianism has been Christian for most of its history. It was

only shortly after the Civil War that this came to be questioned on a large scale.

It was the Boston Unitarian minister Theodore Parker who had started all of the trouble. Or maybe it was Emerson. No Emerson had left the church; he had made things easy. It is easy to dismiss people who have dismissed you. But Parker was different. He still considered himself a Unitarian minister. Except that seemed to be the extent of his loyalty. The grandson of the commanding officer at the Battle of Lexington, Parker had his ancestor's combative spirit. Not to mention his ample intelligence. Parker said that what was essential about Christianity was the moral teaching of Jesus. Everything else could go, as far as he was concerned. Christian ethics were "permanent" and the rituals, the sacraments; even the most basic theological doctrines were "transient." Real religion was about following those ethical teachings, not the Christian doctrines.

This sat none too well with the established Unitarian ministers in New England. Yearning for respectability in Boston's upper crust, the Unitarians could sometimes get a little sensitive when their dirty laundry got aired in public. And that is exactly what Parker had done; talked about the transient and permanent in Christianity during an ordination service with all kinds of religious denominations present. Soon other ministers would not exchange pulpits with him, meaning that they did not consider him among their peers. Worst of all, the yearbook

containing the names of all the Unitarian ministers in the country, left his name out! This is not like someone these days forgetting to list your minister's name in the UUA directory. This was as close to excommunication as the Unitarians got! It essentially meant that Parker was getting pushed out. Perhaps more dangerous to the fledgling Unitarian movement was that Parker was gaining a following, particularly among young ministers in the west.

Those were the Radicals, and they represented the left wing of the controversy. Opposed to them were the Christians, centered in and around Boston and other parts of New England. They represented the right wing of this dispute, but to call them "conservative" would be unfair. They did not believe in the Trinity, or in the divinity of Christ. In any other denomination they would be cast out as heretical liberals. For the Unitarians they were "conservative" because they still held that Christianity and its rituals were still important and relevant to Unitarianism. Channing rarely even used the word "Unitarian." He always talked about "Christians" as if it were a synonym for "Unitarians." I guess for him it was. So too for our liberal Christians arguing with Parker.

Thus the debate: was Unitarianism a branch of Christianity, or did it include more than that? Had it moved so far away as to become its own separate religion? These are tensions that Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism has always struggled with: the centripetal force

of individual beliefs pulling us apart, yet held together by the gravitational pull of our shared covenant as a religious community. It has led most of our ancestors, as well as our newcomers, to ask the simple existential question: “Who are we?”

These were the questions that troubled James Freeman Clarke’s soul. He had the Transcendentalist theology of Theodore Parker, but was as much an institutionalist as any Unitarian could be. Somehow these two groups had to come together for the sake of liberal religion in America. Clarke was a prolific writer and a deep thinker. He was one of the first people in America to write a book about the religions of the world. Clarke wanted to form what his friend Henry Whitney Bellows called the “Broad Church Movement”: a coalition of the middle. A unification of liberal Christian thought with the insights of Emerson applied to them. It would be an association of congregations rather than individuals. Reason would be wedded to intuition, the poet and the philosopher would become one.

So Clarke wrote a book, “Vexed Questions in Theology” in which he laid out five points of Unitarian theology that might fit this agenda of unification. They were: The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Christ, the Salvation by Character, and the Progress of Mankind “onward and upward forever.” These he thought were the central theological principles of Unitarianism that could unite Christians and Transcendentalists. Yes, Jesus’ words and deeds in the

Bible are important, but so is the flowering of the human soul. “The teaching of Jesus is not something to be outgrown; for it is not a definite system, but an ever unfolding principle. It is a germ of growth, and therefore has no finality in its past forms.”

Of course, not everyone was on board. Some people said that Unitarians really believed in the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, and the Neighborhood of Boston. Yet it was this very provincialism that Clarke was trying to away from. He wrote most of this while serving the Unitarian Church in Louisville Kentucky. Kentucky! Unitarians in Kentucky! Yes. Unitarians need to be in Kentucky, said Clarke. We need to be a national religion—in today’s political language we need a run fifty state campaign. Clarke’s vision was that Unitarianism would grow and prosper. It would overcome its divisions and spread all over the West. For him, that was the Promised Land. His faith was in never-ending progress.

It may be hard for us to appreciate this. “Onward and Upward Forever” sounds like a cheesy bumper sticker to modern ears. You can just imagine the UUA forming focus groups behind one-way mirrors testing different slogans. Then one day at General Assembly they unveil “Onward and Upward Forever” to us all! Yeah, it sounds cheesy to me too. It is hard to pronounce mankind’s infinite improvement on the other side of the twentieth century. Clarke lived at a time when the theory of Evolution had just been articulated, and optimism about the

infinite evolutionary possibilities was overwhelming. The horrors of the Civil War were over and they would never be repeated, they thought. But ahead lay the Great War in Europe, a decade long Depression that spanned the globe, and the near extermination of the Jewish people. It is tough to say that we are always improving as a species after those events. As for adaptability, well given what we know of the environment, we may very well be maladapted to this planet very soon if we are not more careful.

So I do not begrudge James Freeman Clarke his infinite optimism about the world even if it does come off as naïve to us now. Just as I would not begrudge the ancient Israelites for thinking they were headed toward a land of milk and honey that God had promised them. Why? The reason, is because both Clarke and the Israelites had hope.

I know some Buddhist thinkers, popular well-known writers in fact, who will tell you that hope is not such a good thing. Hope, they say, is too future oriented. You should remain in the present moment, do not hope for things that might happen. Those are just ghosts, flights of fancy and imagination. They are not real, what is here and now is real. That is what your life is. They would probably laugh, or at least smile, at James Freeman Clarke's "Onward and Upward Forever" pronouncement. If hope were just a wish, an empty longing for the way we want the future to be, then I suppose that I would agree.

However, the philosopher and cultural commentator Cornel West has a different theory about hope. He says that hope has a very pragmatic effect in the here and now. Hope for the Promised Land, however you define it, has some practical uses. He notes that during the period of slavery and during the Civil Rights era, hope kept people going even when it would have been reasonable to give up. Hope is what keeps the Israelites traveling through the wilderness for so long. Hope is what a bluesman sings in a small nightclub along the Mississippi Delta. Cornel West calls this “Tragicomic Hope.” It is a hope for a better day that takes seriously the suffering in the present moment, by buoying our spirits and inspiring us to move forward. It is an ironic look at life. In the midst of despair and nihilism only hope, the kind of hope that says that our present condition has to have some meaning, some purpose to it, only that kind of hope will keep us going in the rough times.

Often the Exodus story is retold as a narrative of hope for the future that sustains people through the present of bondage and slavery. Personally when I read the Bible, and most other religious texts for that matter, I don’t often take it at face value. Because the Bible teaches its religious lessons through story most of the time, one has to have a rather playful and creative attitude when approaching the text. This is my primary criticism of Fundamentalism. You miss most of the really good, insightful meaning in the Bible by taking it too literally. The surface

narrative hides things, and it is up to the thoughtful reader to find it. It can be a rather fun actually.

To me, Egypt and the Promised Land are spiritual states of being more so than they are actual places. Obviously Egypt is a real place; I am not saying I don't think it is. But as far as the Bible is concerned, Egypt is the land of bondage, of servitude, of coercion and isolation. There is even a commandment, later in the Bible, that says that you shall not go back to Egypt. There are moments in Exodus where the certainty of slavery seems more tempting to the Israelites than the uncertainty of God's promises. But Egypt isn't just a place; it is a place in your soul. It is wherever you are in bondage. Perhaps your Egypt is an addiction or something you are in denial about, something you are afraid of. It may have the comfort of familiarity, but it is unhealthy. Exodus tells us that hope is the thing that moves us beyond our so-called limitations and into the Promised Land. That Promised Land might have milk and honey, but it is a place of freedom, a part of the soul that feels connected to others and perhaps connected to the sacred if you choose to go there.

For James Freeman Clarke, that Promised Land was the progress of mankind onward and upward forever. It was a Unitarianism newly united and free to blossom into something wholly new and exciting. Notice that he had no good reason for this optimism; he wanted to start Unitarianism in Kentucky. Don't get me wrong, I like Kentucky, but you would have to be a pretty hopeful optimist to choose it as your

launching point for growing Unitarianism in the mid-nineteenth century. I am sure all the growth consultants told him that the demographics weren't right, and there was a million reasons not to do it. But a man with a clear mission, like those five points of Unitarianism, and a vision of what Unitarianism could be, like that Broad Church movement, is a difficult thing to stop.

This I think is the lesson for us today. That despite what may be happening in the stock market, or in our portfolios, or in our national politics, there is nothing that can stop hope. Hope isn't just about the Promised Land, it is about right now, helping us gain a clearer sense of why we exist as a church and where we are going. What could we do if we dared to hope? What new reality might be within our grasp if we were to take that risk, sometimes great and more often quite small, that set aside the actual and dared to dream the possible? What if the unknown future was more compelling to us than the familiar past? I will tell you what. Onward and upward forever, that is what.

“Men are contented, no matter how poor their lot, so long as they can hope for something better. And men are discontented, no matter how fortunate their condition, when they have nothing more to look forward to. The greatest sufferer who hopes may have nothing, but he possesses all things: the most prosperous man who is deprived of hope may have all things, but he possesses nothing.” The “Progress of mankind onward and upward forever” may be a hope that is never truly

attained. Perhaps like Moses, we will live long enough to see it, but never enter in ourselves. But at any rate, whether we get there or not, hope has served its purpose in the present moment by guiding our feet and lifting our spirits. A vision of what the world could be can be just enough of a boost to heal us. Is it a daydream and a distraction according to a Zen master? Probably. But it is also a necessary adaptation for us human beings who must live in this world full of indifference and cynicism.

I know there have been some tough days in the financial world. Times are scary and uncertain. While I cannot help you with your portfolio, I can do something. I am not in the investment business; I am in the hope business, and nothing conquers fear as well as hope. Whatever your Promised Land is that you hope for, be it for yourself, your family, or your church, I urge you not to dismiss it too readily because it seems like a far off pipedream. No, let that vision fill you up and move you through another day. Whatever makes your heart sing, be ten times as bold in getting there. The Board and the Executive Team does that at meeting sometimes, we ask “How could we be ten times as bold as a church?” That is an onward and upward spirit that we need to cultivate especially when times are hard.

May we seek and find the hope that moves us forward. May we hear the deepest callings of our heart. And when we are the most afraid,

let us recall that Promised Land, and remember that we are not alone.
Amen Blessed Be.