

**“THE CANDLES OUR ANCESTORS LIT FOR US: JOSEPH PRIESTLY”**

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Call to Gather: from “Nishmat” by Marge Piercy

We stand in the midst of the burning world  
primed to burn with compassionate love and justice,  
to burn inward and find holy fire at the core,  
to burn outward and see the world that is all  
of one flesh with us, see under the trash,  
through the smog, the furry bee in the apple blossom,  
the trout leaping, the candles our ancestors lit for us.<sup>1</sup>

Reading: from a letter Benjamin Franklin wrote to Joseph Priestley’s former student, Benjamin Vaughn. Included in the fabulous biography *The Invention of Air: A story of Science, Faith, Revolution, and the Birth of America* by Steven Johnson

Remember me affectionately to...the honest heretic Dr. Priestley. I do not call him honest by way of distinction; for I think all the heretics I have known have been virtuous... They have the virtue and fortitude or they would not venture to own their heresy; and they cannot afford to be deficient in any of the other virtues, as that would give advantage to their many enemies; and they have not like orthodox sinners, such a number of friends to excuse or justify them. Do not, however, mistake me. It is not to my good friend’s heresy that I impute his honesty. On the contrary, ‘tis his honesty that has brought up on him the character of heretic.<sup>2</sup>

Sermon

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<sup>1</sup> Marge Piercy, “Nishmat” in *Available Light* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> I’ll use *The Invention of Air* extensively in this sermon. Steven Johnson, *The Invention of Air: A Story of Science, Faith, Revolution, and the Birth of America* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), p. 141.

Our lives are different and better because of Joseph Priestley—our lives as human beings, as Americans and as Unitarian Universalists. Priestley was a famous Unitarian minister and chemist who lived in the momentous days of the second half of the eighteenth century.

Priestley was one of the creators of modern chemistry. His particular role was blowing up scientific paradigms that had held sway for nearly two thousand years. He discovered oxygen and the important role plants have in producing oxygen. His scientific innovations also helped the American colonies win their struggle for independence: his work helped the French develop high-quality gunpowder more abundantly—gunpowder which they then made available to their American allies. Some of his technological accomplishments were crucial a hundred and fifty or two hundred years later in the development of radio, television, semiconductors and integrated circuits. Not all of his contributions have proven to be positive: we can pin some of the United States’ obesity epidemic today on Priestley: he invented carbonation in beverages and so is the father of soda pop.<sup>3</sup>

A true person of the Enlightenment, Priestley had an enormous impact beyond science. He was a very significant political figure first in England and then in the newly formed United States. And he was probably the best known religious dissenter of his time. More than anything, he wanted to inject reason into religious discourse. He helped found the Unitarian association in England,<sup>4</sup> and he helped found the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia in 1797—the first church to name itself “Unitarian” in the United States. Our Unitarian Universalist faith today is different because of Joseph Priestley. Most notably, I would argue that he helped pave the way first for Transcendentalism, and then for humanism—two extremely important theological/philosophical movements within our faith. Though not himself a Transcendentalist or a humanist, I don’t know that either of these heresies would have developed in our faith without Priestley. By recognizing that science and history and reason should all be used in matters of faith, he opened the door to basing religion on things other than the scripture or doctrine.

There’s another way in which Priestley’s impact can still be felt, especially in our UU congregations today: coffee played a big role in his story. Not to exclude the non-coffee drinkers among us—I know there are some—but coffee seems to have an inordinately large role in our UU congregations. The Rev. Christopher Raible, a UU minister who served our Brookfield church in the 1960s, captured this well when he penned new words to the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy:”

Coffee, Coffee, Coffee,  
Praise the strength of coffee.  
Early in the morn we rise with thoughts of only thee.  
Served fresh or reheated,  
Dark by thee defeated,  
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, pp. 31, 38, 128-129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Though all else we scoff we  
Come to church for coffee;  
If we're late to congregate, we come in time for thee.  
Coffee our one ritual,  
Drinking it habitual,  
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.<sup>5</sup>

It turns out that Priestley found his way to the world of scientific, political and religious innovation largely through the coffeehouse movement that was the all the rage in eighteenth century England. Everywhere he lived, he found a lively coffeehouse to frequent. Coffeehouses of his era were places of free-wheeling conversation and an open exchange of ideas. They were great places to find inspiration, to try out new ideas, to clarify them, change them, and deepen them. Priestley greatly valued the spirit of free inquiry that he found at the coffeehouse.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly for Priestley, he also found patrons at the coffeehouses—people who decided to support him financially. This gave him the benefit of ample leisure time in which to do his scientific dabbling. And that's really what his scientific work was in spite of the enormity of its impact: dabbling. Science was a hobby for him. In a way that is mind-boggling to me, he lived the old, tiresome joke about ministers: that we hardly work besides the Sunday services. Priestley managed through all his years as a minister to work just an hour or two a day. This left plenty of time to do his scientific work, to think, and to write the nearly five hundred books and pamphlets he produced in his lifetime. The only problem is that he didn't earn enough money as a minister to support his family, let alone to equip his laboratory. So the coffeehouse moneybags he found were extremely important to his career.<sup>7</sup>

In his brilliant biography of Priestly, Steven Johnson lifts up the role of coffee itself in the unfolding of the Enlightenment and, by implication, Priestley's own story. Johnson notes that the favored drink prior to coffee was beer—even in the morning. Discussions fueled by caffeine tend to be, well, more productive than discussions fueled by beer. Johnson writes:

Coffee is a stimulant that has been clinically proven to improve cognitive function—particularly for memory-related tasks—during the first cup or two. Increase the amount of “smart” drugs flowing through individual brains, and the collective intelligence of the culture will become smarter, if enough people get hooked. Create enough caffeine-abusers in your society and you'll be statistically more likely to launch the Age of Reason.<sup>8</sup>

Today, I would note, the heritage of the eighteenth century coffeehouse is alive and well here and in places like Harmony Café.<sup>9</sup>

Among the most important personal and intellectual connections Priestley made in coffeehouses was his friendship with Benjamin Franklin, when Franklin lived in London prior to the American Revolution. In 1767, Priestley wrote a text about electricity that became *the*

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.firstunitariantoronto.org/coffee.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, pp. 52, 88, 132, 204.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49, 115.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.focol.org/harmonycafe/> for more information on Harmony Café.

textbook on electricity for the next hundred years. Franklin of course figured prominently in it: Priestley devoted a hundred pages of the book to Franklin's work. The famous and timeless image of Franklin conducting his experiment with the kite comes from this book.<sup>10</sup>

Franklin in turn was a great help in Priestley's breathtaking discovery that plants manufacture oxygen. The roots of this discovery lay in Priestley's childhood—he and his brother liked to put spiders in an airtight container to see what would happen. Of course, the spiders died. One day in his lab he put a mint plant into an airtight jar. He expected it would die, too, but was surprised that the plant actually did quite well. He put a lit candle in the jar with the mint and was even more surprised that it continued to burn. He put a mouse in, and the mouse survived for awhile. With Franklin's help, Priestley quickly comprehended the significance of this phenomenon. In recognizing that the air in our atmosphere and organic life are inter-related, he stumbled onto the idea of the ecosystem—an idea that wasn't fully embraced by scientists for another hundred and fifty years. Franklin even grasped the environmental implication of the discovery: he wrote Priestley that this discovery should provide “some check to the rage of destroying trees that grow near houses.”<sup>11</sup>

Priestley won great acclaim for his scientific work. But his decision to side with the American rebels in their struggle against his own country brought even greater condemnation. Even the king verbally blasted him. The famous writer Samuel Johnson in his screed against the American cause, *Taxation No Tyranny*, called Priestley an “evil man” and derisively noted that his work “unsettles everything” (a charge Priestley certainly wouldn't have denied).<sup>12</sup> Priestley compounded his unpopularity in England by his sympathy with the French Revolution. This didn't go over well with the establishment either—especially the monarchy.

His radical politics were bad enough, but it was Priestley's heretical religious beliefs that made him the most hated person in England. He became a religious dissenter in his teens and started preaching the gospel of dissent in his twenties. In 1782, he wrote the widely noted—and scorned—book called *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*. In this book, Priestley attacked as corruptions the magic and mysticism that was layered by the church onto the simple story and teachings of Jesus. He asserted that “the idolatry of the Christian church began with the deification and proper worship of Jesus Christ.” In a word: this was heresy. And it didn't go over well, either.<sup>13</sup>

The next year, Priestley responded to his critics with a sermon that he then published as a pamphlet. Provocatively but probably unwisely, he included in the sermon a metaphor for his heresy: in his words, he was, “as it were, laying gunpowder, grain by grain, under the old building of error and superstition, which a single spark may hereafter inflame, so as to produce an instantaneous explosion.”<sup>14</sup> The fact he delivered the sermon on the anniversary of Guy Fawkes's attempt to blow up Parliament added to the sermon's controversy. The gunpowder was a metaphor—Priestley was not advocating violence on behalf of dissent. But that was perhaps too fine a point for many. The sermon became known as the “Gunpowder Sermon,” and Priestley as “Gunpowder Joe.” Rebel sympathizer, lover of France, Unitarian, heretic, he was now the most hated man in all of England.

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<sup>10</sup> Johnson, pp. 32, 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65, 70-71, 76-82, 95-97, 107-108.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129-131.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 152-155, 158.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

This hatred boiled over on Bastille Day in 1791. A newly formed group of dissenters in Priestley's city planned to hold a dinner at a local hotel. Fearing trouble, the members of the group decided to move the dinner from the evening to the afternoon. On the advice of friends, Priestley stayed away altogether from the dinner. Around eight o'clock, not coincidentally as the pubs emptied, a mob gathered at the hotel. By then the dissenters had all left. But that didn't really matter to the mob. They smashed the windows of the hotel and then made their way to the nearby church that Priestley served. They burned it down and then attacked another dissenting church in town. Meanwhile, Priestley and his wife and children quietly played backgammon at their house about a mile away, unaware of the mob's rampage. The mob decided that Priestley's house would be the next target. Fortunately a friend raced ahead and warned the Priestleys to flee. Shortly after they fled, the rioters arrived and burned Priestley's house and laboratory to the ground. In the coming days, several other houses and churches of dissenters were destroyed. Eventually the king sent troops to put down the violence, but not before asserting that Priestley deserved what he got.

Priestley lived in hiding for several weeks until things calmed down. He lay low for an extended period after that but then wrote a letter to the inhabitants of his city. He noted that he was peaceful in his dissent and lamented in particular the harm done to scientific exploration through the destruction of his lab. He also noted that his peaceful spirit reflected better on the religion of Jesus than the frenzied mob's violence. Priestley never again felt at home in England. Three years later, he and his wife boarded a ship, the *Samson*, and set sail for the United States—the first in a long and distinguished line of forced or voluntarily exiled scientists who would flee to our country.<sup>15</sup>

Because of his support of the American Revolution and his fame as a scientist, Priestley was initially warmly greeted by President Washington, Vice President Adams and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and others. Soon enough, though, he found himself in his old role as heretic and outcast. Adams in particular distanced himself from the controversial Priestley as he pursued the presidency. (Interesting, Johnson notes: this wasn't the last time a presidential candidate would distance himself from a presidential candidate.) As the political and personal rift between Adams and Jefferson deepened after Adams' election to the presidency, Priestley publicly sided with Jefferson. This blew up when some letters written to Priestley were stolen and leaked to the press. They revealed in Priestly both pro-French and strongly anti-Adams sentiments. Under the newly passed Alien and Sedition Acts, Priestley found himself in jeopardy of prison or deportation. He lay low for awhile, but then announced that he was too old to become secretive and cautious. He blasted back at Adams and the immoral laws that Adams had signed. For unclear reasons, Adams decided not to prosecute Priestley. Partly because of the unpopular Alien and Sedition Acts, Jefferson defeated Adams in the election that followed. Priestley happily lived his last years in a country with a government he could respect. He died shortly before Jefferson's re-election in 1804.<sup>16</sup>

Priestley's impact on his new country did not end with his death. He became a focal point of the epic series of letters written between Adams and Jefferson many years later. In the 165 letters exchanged between these two titans over thirteen years, they mentioned George Washington three times. They mentioned Franklin five times. They mentioned Priestley fifty-two times. This was partly because Priestley's religious views powerfully impacted them—especially Jefferson. For Jefferson, Priestley's work—especially his book on the corruptions of

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<sup>15</sup> Johnson, pp. 163-178.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-201.

Christianity—was nothing less than the basis of his faith. The other reason for Priestley’s prominence in the correspondence was the publication of Jefferson’s letters to Priestley shortly after he defeated Adams in the 1800 election. The letters were published about a year into the correspondence between Adams and Jefferson. Their writings during the first year were cordial but superficial. The publication of Jefferson’s letters to Priestley, which were highly critical of Adams—set Adams off. He blasted Jefferson in several letters. Jefferson responded graciously, but he didn’t back down from his disagreements with Adams. Steven Johnson calls this the “defining moment” of the correspondence between the two: it was when the correspondence became a “genuine, two-way debate.” Adams focused much of his remaining letters on refuting points Jefferson made in his letters to Priestley.<sup>17</sup>

Johnson makes a final point in his biography that is worth thinking about. Priestley, he observes, was an incredibly optimistic person. He wasn’t naively optimistic: he did have his share of bad things in his life—having his house burned down by a mob, for example. But in spite of all that happened, he held to the classic Enlightenment view that humanity, fueled especially by scientific innovation, was moving forward to an ever-brighter future. Noting that each of the American founders had a pessimism streak somewhere in their personality, Johnson traces the optimism that has historically characterized our nation not to the founders but to Joseph Priestley: “The temperament that we expect to find at the birth of (the United States)—bountiful optimism, an untroubled sense that the world must inevitably see the light of reason—arrives aboard the *Samson* in 1794”<sup>18</sup> in the person of Joseph Priestley.

Johnson also points out that often this American optimism has been expressed as nostalgia for the past—as in Ronald Reagan’s famous “morning in America” mantra. But this is a betrayal of Priestley’s vision: he wasn’t looking backwards to a glorious past; he was looking forward. And as Johnson also notes, many progressives today have also betrayed Priestley’s optimism: they see the future as bleak and dystopian. There is good reason for this: the Enlightenment optimism was fatally challenged by the misery of World War One, the horror of World War Two, and fears about global warming and environmental apocalypse (to name but a few causes for today’s pessimism among progressives). But when we are nostalgic for the past or fearful of the future, Johnson argues, we “betray the core and connected values that Priestley shared with the American founders.” Johnson sees hope in the “dramatically expanded vista” of human knowledge and the increasing realization that everything is truly interconnected. So do I—especially in the recognition of all of life’s basic interdependence. Maybe it is time to nurture hope in the future, even as we are realistic about the challenges that face us today.

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson, pp. xiv, 155, 206-210.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.