

**"THE CANDLES OUR ANCESTORS LIT: WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING"
by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**

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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 turn inward and find holy fire at the core,
to turn 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.
Fill us as the tide rustles into the reeds in the marsh.
Fill us the rushing water overflows the pitcher.
Fill us as light fills a room with its dancing.
Let the little quarrels of the bones and the snarling
of the lesser appetites and the whining of the ego cease.
Let silence still us so you may show us your shining
and we can out of that stillness rise and praise.[\[1\]](#)

Readings: from William Ellery Channing, *Slavery*, 1835

Now, let every reader ask himself this plain question: Could I, can I, be rightfully seized, and made a passive instrument of another's will and pleasure; be subjected to another's irresponsible power; be subjected to stripes of another's will; be denied the control and use of my own limbs and faculties for my own good? Does any man, so questioned, doubt, waver, look about him for an answer? Is not the reply given immediately, intuitively, by his whole inward being? Does not an unhesitating, unerring conviction spring up in my breast, that no other man can acquire such a right in myself? Do we not repel, indignantly and with horror, the thought of being reduced to the condition of tools and chattels to a fellow-creature?

Is there any moral truth more deeply rooted in us, than that such a degradation would be an infinite wrong? And, if this impression be a delusion, on what single moral conviction can we rely? This deep assurance, that we cannot be rightfully made another's property, does not rest on the hue of our skins, or the place of our birth, or our strength, or wealth. These things do not enter our thoughts. The consciousness of indestructible rights is a part of our moral being. The consciousness of our humanity involves the persuasion that we cannot be owned as a tree or a brute. As men, we cannot justly be made slaves. Then no man can be rightfully enslaved.[\[2\]](#)

Our children's religious education program this year focuses on Unitarian Universalist identity. To understand who we are and what we believe today as Unitarian Universalists, our children must learn about our roots--about the history and heritage of our UU faith.

And so must we as adults. I am often asked how we hold together as a congregation in the absence of a creed we all share. How do we hold together given our staggering theological diversity? I answer that there are two, inter-related glues that hold us together: our UU principles and our UU heritage. Whether you or I theologically are Christian, Buddhist, agnostic, earth-centered, atheist, humanist or theist, we all as Unitarian Universalist share common spiritual ancestors. We share Francis David, Olympia Brown, Norbert Capek, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Susan B. Anthony, William Ellery Channing and the other great UU's who went before. We are now entrusted with the faith that they bequeathed us. In the spirit of our dynamic history, our job is not to keep this faith unchanged, but to continue growing it--just as they did. It is important to learn the stories of our ancestors, so from time to time I do an occasional sermon portraying one of our ancestors.

William Ellery Channing is the most important person in the birth of American Unitarianism. He began his career in 1803 as the minister of a Congregationalist church--the Federal Street Church in Boston. At the time, there were only two Unitarian congregations in the entire country. The worst thing you could be called in the Congregational church was a Unitarian. Many a liberally inclined Congregational minister stood on the edge of rejecting the Trinity, only to jump quickly back from the precipice when someone called him a Unitarian. No doubt the liberally inclined Channing had the "Unitarian" insult hurled at him more than once.

Always true to his own conscience, Channing decided in 1819 that it was time to jump off the precipice. He used the occasion of Jared Sparks' ordination in Baltimore as his platform for jumping off the precipice into Unitarianism. During his ordination sermon, Channing declared himself a Unitarian and outlined what he meant by Unitarian. He rejected the doctrine of the Trinity as misleading, injurious to devotion, and baseless in scripture. "With Jesus," he said, "we worship the Father, as the only living and true God."[\[3\]](#) Worshipping Jesus as divine takes away from worshipping God, he argued. God is one, not three.

How did he come to these conclusions? By reading scripture and using his own mind. He declared:

The Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books...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."[\[4\]](#)

For Channing, reason and faith go hand in hand. You cannot check your mind when you enter the church, but rather must fully use your mind as you contemplate your beliefs. The Bible is so contradictory and so ambiguous in its meaning that you have to use your mind to figure out its truths.

A corollary to Channing's belief in the importance of reason was freedom. If you are to use your mind in matters of faith, then you must also have the freedom to follow the beliefs that your mind leads you to embrace. The human mind is individual, so faith therefore is individualized. Channing's approach carried the Reformation's emphasis on the individual's belief and conscience to its radical end: every person has the right to freedom of conscience.

Channing also spoke in favor of freedom's twin concept, tolerance. Without tolerance, there can be no freedom. For Channing, tolerance was a very important religious principle.

Channing had his Baltimore sermon printed up as a pamphlet and distributed widely throughout the United States. His pamphlet likely was the second mostly widely distributed pamphlet in the early history of the United States--only behind Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*.

His sermon had a huge and immediate impact. Channing said out loud what many liberal Congregationalists had long been thinking. Many Congregationalists--especially in New England--read it and found the courage to say that they were Unitarians, too. Within six years, something like a hundred and fifty previously Congregational churches declared that they were Unitarian, and the American Unitarian Association was born: all kicked off by Channing's Baltimore sermon. Without a doubt, Channing's Baltimore sermon is the most significant sermon in American Unitarian history.

Channing didn't dwell on his fame, and he never allowed his beliefs to be set in stone. He recognized that one's beliefs are forever subject to change as one goes through life. New thoughts, new experiences, new questions: all of these lead to the evolution of individual beliefs. Channing believed that inner turmoil--with its capacity to open us to growth--is a gift from God.^[5] So Channing never held onto any of his beliefs with absolute certainty but always sought to remain open to growth and change. "Channing," one biographer observed, "lived a life of unresolved uncertainty."^[6]

Nowhere is this evolution of Channing's belief more evident than in his view of the paramount issue of his day: slavery. A few of his beliefs early in his career kept him on the sidelines of the intensifying fight over slavery. One was his utter disdain for zealotry. For him, zealotry and reason are totally incompatible. He expressed this notion, too, in the Baltimore sermon:

When we observe a fervor, called religious, in men whose general character expresses little refinement and elevation, and whose piety seems at war with reason, we pay it little respect. We honor religion too much to give its sacred name to a feverish, forced, fluctuating zeal, which has little power over life.^[7]

Even on his deathbed, Channing warned: "We must beware of overexcited feelings."^[8]

Well, most of the Abolitionists were nothing if not fervent and zealous and overexcited. Channing despised their zealotry, and he despised their self-righteous conviction that the South was the very incarnation of evil. Abolitionists good; slaveholders bad: it was a formula Channing could never embrace. Disdainfully, he kept himself at arm's length from the Abolitionists for many years.

He also hid from Abolitionists in the shelter of his individualistic, inwardly focused faith. Faith was a matter of the mind far more than of the will and the hands. In a foreshadowing of some of today's positive thinkers, he even maintained for a time that escaping from such ugly matters as slavery was the proper spiritual approach.[\[9\]](#)

But Abolitionists literally kept knocking at his door, and the terrible, unjust, undeserved plight of the enslaved millions kept knocking at his heart. Because of his openness to growth and new ideas, he opened the door. He allowed the fight over slavery to change him and his faith. And he became more and more radical in his opposition to slavery as the years passed. By the end of his career (and life), he advocated civil disobedience. He became so outspoken against slavery that the only church he ever served--the Federal Street Church in Boston--essentially fired him. Because he acted strongly against slavery, Channing ended his life an outcaste from his church and from many Unitarian circles.

Channing's struggle with slavery shook two of his foundational beliefs. The first had to do with evil. Early in his career, Channing--like the Transcendentalists and many other liberals of his era--believed in the essential goodness of humans. In the face of Calvinists, he and others adopted the radical belief that God could be found within the individual soul. For Channing and many other liberals, belief in Satan disappeared along with many other biblical beliefs they found superstitious and unreasonable.

Slavery brought evil back for Channing--and the evil wasn't present only in the slaveholders' souls. Unlike most of the Abolitionists, Channing saw evil in his own soul, too. Not just God can be found within the human soul, but Satan, too, he came to believe. Slavery begins with me. And it begins with northern complicity. In a congregation of wealthy Bostonians--many who were getting rich quick in the slave trade--Channing's focus on attacking northern complicity ruffled many feathers. And it certainly led to Channing's de facto ouster from his pulpit. At the same time, he was never very popular with Abolitionists because he refused to ascribe guilt and evil solely to the South.

The second foundational belief Channing's encounter with slavery changed was his view of action. The evil of slavery pushed him to move beyond his characteristic unresolved uncertainty to action. The roots of such a move are evident earlier in his life--for example, he tells Jared Sparks at the Baltimore ordination, "May your life preach more loudly than your lips"[\[10\]](#)--but action was not a developed part of Channing's self until his encounter with slavery. In actively opposing slavery, Channing moved from a secluded, sedentary life of the mind to an active, more balanced life of mind, body and soul.

But even as he acted more vigorously and, dare we say it, even passionately against slavery, he still tried to remain open to other's viewpoints. In one of his last sermons, he suggested that this should be his epitaph:

Respect those who differ from you and also respect yourselves. Do not feel as if you had monopolized truth or goodness. Treat none with derision. Esteem no (one) the more for thinking as you do, and no (one) the less for thinking otherwise, but judge all...by the principles which govern their lives.[\[11\]](#)

Much of the brightness the candle our Unitarian Universalist faith has today comes from William Ellery Channing. Look at the living principles inscribed on the walls in our foyer, and you can

see Channing through and through. The free and responsible search for truth, the use of reason, affirming of the inherent dignity and worth of all people, accepting others, promoting justice and equity: these all come at least in part from Channing. And as Channing would want, these principles are living, evolving principles and not rigid straightjackets. Our Fellowship and our faith continue to evolve and grow, never stopping to rest in the status quo. The light of Channing's flame burns still brightly in our principles and in all of our Unitarian Universalist souls.

Maybe his fellow outcaste Unitarian minister and Abolitionist Theodore Parker put it best about Channing when he said a week after Channing died:

It was a MORAL POWER that spoke in him...He saw through the shadows and into the reality of life. Many knew more of things as they are; few...have seen so true to things as they ought to be.[\[12\]](#)

May this great ancestor's candle continue to light our way.

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[\[1\]](#) Marge Piercy, *Available Light* (New York: Knopf, 1988), pp. 122-123.

[\[2\]](#) David Parke and Conrad Wright, eds., *Channing Speaks* (a pamphlet published by the Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston).

[\[3\]](#) Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism* (Boston: Skinner Books, 1986), pp. 57-58.

[\[4\]](#) Wright, p. 49-50.

[\[5\]](#) Andrew Delbanco, *William Ellery Channing: an essay on the liberal spirit in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 135.

[\[6\]](#) Delbanco, p. x.

[\[7\]](#) Wright, p. 83.

[\[8\]](#) Jack Mendelsohn, *Channing: The Reluctant Radical* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1971), p. 282.

[\[9\]](#) Delbanco, p. 126.

[\[10\]](#) Wright, p. 84.

[\[11\]](#) Mendelsohn, p. 232.

[\[12\]](#) Delbanco, p. 115.