

## Matthew Arnold and his poem "Dover Beach"

You may have noticed that the author of "Calm Soul of All Things", our meditation hymn, is Matthew Arnold, the subject of my talk today. I like to sing this hymn and always, in my mind, acknowledge Matthew Arnold as the author of the words by reading his name at the bottom of the page. The words are from a larger poem, "Lines Written in Kensington Gardens". The meaning of "Calm Soul of All Things" is not what I might term 'straight forward' but like a lot of poetry the lines are rich in interpretation.

Calm Soul of All Things make it mine to feel, amid the city's jar  
That there abides a peace of thine I did not make, and can not mar.  
The will to neither strive nor cry, the power to feel with others, give.  
Calm, calm me more, nor let me die before I have begun to live.

Although the word God is not mentioned, Arnold seems to be addressing his poem to some entity which he calls the Calm Soul of All Things. This entity has the power to let Arnold feel peace and also empathy. The poem suggests that amid the city's jar or in other words the hubbub of life, it is possible to find peace, not of his own origin, and in that peace to live life more fully. The appeal to a Calm Soul means to me that he feels anxiety. When you need to be calmed it is because you are anxious or worried about something. What I hope to show in Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" is that his anxiety comes from the clash between a belief in the literal truth of the Bible and the changing Victorian world which questioned this certainty.

Matthew Arnold was a Victorian. He was born in England in 1822, three years after Queen Victoria who was born in 1819 and he died in 1888, thirteen years before she died in 1901. The Victorian Era was a very interesting time and Victoria's reign was a long one. She became queen in 1838 when she was crowned at Westminster on 28 June at the age of 19. She married Prince Albert in 1840. They had nine children. The Victorian Age is usually defined as the years between 1838, the year she came to the throne, to 1901, the year she died. Earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the time from about 1800 to 1832 is called the Romantic Era and I am sure that you all remember your poetry from that era, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats and so on. After Victorian Era we had the Edwardian Era, then the First World War, between the wars, then the Second World War and so on up to the so called Modern Era.

Victoria ruled for a long time, 63 years. It was a time of change in England. Two of the most important instruments for change were a growing Middle Class and a revolution in what we would now call scientific thinking. The Middle class grew dramatically with the expansion of trade and commerce because of the Industrial Revolution. A lot of people were becoming financially comfortable. In fact the acquisition of money was important in the Victorian Era. The middle class wanted large houses and education for their children. For the second area of change, the world of science, we all think immediately of Charles Darwin but there were many other

important scientists during the Victorian Era especially in the field of Geology, Professor Adam Sedgwick to name an important one. In the field of science it was not a smooth upward line of advancement. For example, Professor Sedgwick, although he calculated the strata of fossil bearing rocks in North Wales and recalculated the age of the earth as older than the 6000 years calculated by using the Bible, he himself was vehemently opposed to Charles Darwin's findings on evolution. Philip Henry Gosse (1810-1888), another scientist, is famous for his pamphlet Omphalos in which he said that God had hidden fossils in the earth for scientists to find. He also did not believe in evolution and sent his pamphlet to Darwin who was at a loss as to what to say in reply.

So England at the end of Victoria's reign in 1901 was quite a different society from that at the beginning of her reign in 1838. So different, in fact, that historians usually divide her reign into three segments, the early Victorian era, the mid Victorian era, and the late Victorian era. Sometimes the mid Victorian era is called the High Noon of the Victorianism. It is so defined because the years from about 1850 to 1867 or 1870 appear to us and to the Victorians themselves to have been relatively secure and unchanging compared to the years before and the years after. In fact if you think of Victorians at home, stiffly dressed, either on their knees at prayer (with the servants also in the room praying) or in the evening gathered around Papa who is reading from the Bible or from one of the latest novels by Charles Dickens or some other suitable author; the Mother in charge of the house, the servants and the children and the Father going to work in his three piece suit, a perfectly trimmed garden in front of a respectable three story house, it is this mid-Victorian Era which you have in mind.

But in fact the world continued to change, albeit slowly, even in this High Noon era. One of the reasons was that scholars especially in Germany were looking at the Bible as a piece of literature and subjecting it to ordinary literary criticism. They were looking at it not as the unassailable word of God but as a 2000 year old document and subjecting it to just the same analysis as any other old document. So they found discrepancies, errors in translation, conflicting moral values and so on.

In England this criticism was seen as an attack on the fundamental foundation of Christianity and hotly resisted by the clergy. Slowly the problems created by looking at the Bible this way intruded into the lives of ordinary people who really wanted the certainty of a religious authority. You can see that, for example, if geologists such as Sedgwick found that rock strata showed that the world was older than the 6000 years that the Bible allowed, some parts of the rest of the Bible might also be wrong. And if so, where could people turn to in order to know what behaviour was right or wrong. The Anglican Church dictated morality but what if the foundation of their morality, the Bible, was not completely accurate?

This is the world Matthew Arnold lived in. He was from a respectable middle class family. Matthew had a very good classical education, that is to say he knew Greek and Latin and the

histories and literature of both ancient civilizations. After Public School, he was educated at Oxford but he did not become a clergyman. Instead when he graduated he became the private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, a prominent member of the government. However his income from this job was not sufficient to allow him to marry so after a few years he became one of Her Majesties' Inspector of Schools with a comfortable income and he married Lucy. In his early adult years he published several books of poetry which were widely known and praised and he was made Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857, a position which he held for 10 years.

Matthew Arnold was a religious man, but not in a traditional sense. He believed in God and he read the Bible and got a lot out of it but he did not believe that the Bible was the unassailable word of God. Like a lot of Victorians he attended the Anglican Church even though he was not in sympathy with all Anglican teaching. For many Victorians, because of Biblical criticism, it seemed that the foundation of Christian religious teaching was crumbling and there was nothing to replace this authority. Arnold said famously that "At the present moment two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that men can not do without it, the other, that they can not do with it as it is."

In some of his poetry Arnold spoke for a lot of Christians or former Christians who were anxious about this state of religious uncertainty. In 1857 in that High Noon of the Victorian Era, he published a slim volume of poetry which included his most famous poem, "Dover Beach". This poem is more than just his most well known poem, it was one of the most well known poems of the Victorian Era and perhaps also of the Edwardian Era. "Dover Beach" for Victorians expressed, although not directly, the uncertainty of the place of religion in their lives.

This poem is a dramatic monologue. The speaker, Arnold, is addressing Lucy, his bride. They are on their honeymoon in Dover Beach. Arnold is looking out of the window of their hotel room. He sees the beach and the white cliffs of Dover. It is night time. Arnold has chosen night rather than the bright light of day, thus the poem has a dark tone. The sea in the poem represents faith, the Christian Faith on which Arnold is commenting in the poem. The tide is full and therefore it is about to go out. He could have chosen any point in the cycle of the tide but it is important to note that the tide is receding, which he suggests is what is happening to the Christian faith. He asks his wife to join him at the window.

The sea is calm tonight,  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; on the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
Come to the window, sweet is the night air.

In the next stanza he comments on the roar of the sea, back and forth as similarly the Christian Faith is battered and then perhaps recovers only to be battered again. It is more than sad, the “eternal note of sadness” says perhaps that faith as it was known will never recover its strength.

Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! You hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

Remember that Arnold had a classical education. Next he draws a comparison with Sophocles who stood at another Sea, the Aegean and thought about humanity. Sophocles believed that the gods can visit ruin on people like a tide driven by the wind and for no apparent reason causing misery. This is where people are now, Arnold says with this parallel line of thought.

Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Aegean (sic), and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

In the next stanza Arnold directly identifies the sea he is looking at as the Sea of Faith. It is a metaphor for how Arnold sees the Christian Faith in England at the time he narrates this poem. Once faith was like a girdle or cloak which circled the earth and it was bright. The image is one of warmth and comfort but he says this is no longer the case. Faith is withdrawing and it is sad, because the world is now naked without its cloak of faith.

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Arnold now turns to his wife. What they do have is their love for one another. The world seems to be something positive, beautiful, joyful but actually it is not. He then uses a word, certitude, which is so important. What is gone, Arnold believes in the mid Victorian world he inhabits, is the certainty of Faith. Without the certainty of the literal truth of the Bible, the foundation of the Anglican Faith is uncertain and so therefore there is no light, like the darkness of the night.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The last three lines of this stanza are the most famous. Because of Arnold's classical education we know that here he is referring to an ancient battle between the Greeks and the Sicilians. The Greek State sent their army in ships to Sicily. The ships arrived at night and the army disembarked. In the darkness it was not clear in the individual battles whether the soldiers were fighting with an enemy soldier or one of their own. That is the confusion. The word ignorant means unknowing. Like the armies struggling in darkness Arnold and the Victorians are struggling in the darkness of uncertainty. It was popular because it evoked the darkness and uncertainty so many Victorians felt.

Matthew Arnold believed that religion had a very important place in life he just thought that religious institutions had to change. The Anglican Church somehow had to reconcile Christianity and scientific discoveries. And clearly that was not happening. Two lines from another of Arnold's poems, "The Grande Chartreuse", encapsulate the dilemma of religious life for him and show the source of his anxiety. Man, Arnold says, is "wandering between two worlds, one dead./ The other powerless to be born." It was the uncertainty of a basis for religious authority and therefore moral authority that so unsettled the Victorians.

I think that we live in a post Victorian world in that for many Christians who depend on a religious authority the new world has not yet been born. They want to depend on an authority, the Bible, which is no longer always relevant to modern society. Happily, we Unitarian Universalists from the beginning of our denominational birth have been able to reassess our outlook with the changing times and also to find inspiration for moral values from a wide variety of sources. We are not limited to the Bible. Louise Foulds, a long-time member of this Church and author of Universalists in Ontario, was fond of saying that Universalists march with the times and were not limited by the ideas of past generations. Thus the Universalists have in their

history several statements of moral guidance. The first was The Philadelphia Declaration of Faith in 1790. That was followed by The Winchester Profession in 1803, then The Essential Principles of the Universalist Church in 1899, and then the last one before the merger with Unitarians, The Washington Avowal of Faith of 1935 all of which predate the Unitarian Universalist Statement of Principles from 1961 which is in our hymnal. Even in this Church a much loved and cherished statement of belief from 1957 once on the wall behind the pulpit was moved to the side wall partly because it looked like a creed to casual attendees but mainly because the language of the statement was no longer as relevant as it once was. I think that we are fortunate that our religion allows us to march with the times, as Louise would say, and that we are not tied to past understandings of humanity and of morality. As far as humanity is concerned, we were the first denomination to ordain women ministers and now we are free to embrace and advocate for gay marriage as a result of our understanding of human sexuality which has changed over the last 50 years. As far as morality is concerned we can see the various shades of grey when looking at moral questions which we did in our workshop a few weeks ago. We do not want a time bound authority. So let us continue to march forward.