

I was at one of those many conferences about growing Unitarian Universalism, 10 years ago, when it came to me to ask the question: *Why would someone want to be a UU?* Actually, the question was a little more sharply focused. *For what purpose would a person be a Unitarian Universalist?*

What's our invitation?

That question led me to today's reading: William Ellery Channing's *I call that Mind Free*. [WEC was the founding theologian of American Unitarianism: a Boston minister, active from about 1819 to somewhere in the 1840's] The reading is an excerpt from a much longer sermon: *Spiritual Freedom*, which Channing gave in 1830. So, this comes from the very earliest days of American Unitarianism.

Reading it, and re-reading it, and reading it with the congregation I served in Worcester, MA, I came to understand it as a roadmap of the Unitarian path to spiritual fulfillment. The Unitarians saw the path to coming into right relationship with God, not as the radical conversion from sin, but from the steady lifelong improvement of one's character. And one developed one's character by strengthening one's virtues.

So I saw that "I Call That Mind Free" was Channing's description of the spiritual path of liberal religion. Of course, that is hard for us to see that be-

cause it is written in such lovely and complex 19th Century vocabulary and grammar and sentences.

So one of my projects has been to bring this up to date — not to rewrite this, but to blow the breath of the 21st century into that 19th century language. I see seven essential virtues of liberal religion suggested in Channing. Why seven? You could slice and dice them differently and come up with different wording. But we have seven principles and so seven is our lucky, sacred, magic number. And because now with Facebook and the Internet, it seems that making a numbered list is the most common style of article. So I could name this sermon: Seven shocking ways that Liberal Religion wants to make you a better person or “Seven secret UU tricks to becoming a better person

I’ll tell you them now: Self-possession, honesty, humility, gratitude, reverence, openness and solidarity.

The most important virtue that Channing talks about is “Self Possession”. His final summary sentence talks of the Free Mind as being one “*which is calm in the midst of tumults and possesses itself.*” Self possession is thinking for yourself, the ability to maintain your mental boundaries, to have what many today call self-differentiation. Thinking for yourself is one of the

cardinal virtues of Unitarian Universalism. Indeed, some think that it is the only virtue of liberal religion.

But what stops you from self-possession? Channing shows some ways that we give up self-possession.

Let me talk personally. What are the obstacles to my self-possession — my ability to think appropriately for myself.

One is that our default way of thinking is what we get from our parents and families. Accepting uncritically what you get from your family and your people. Just to talk one small example. I grew up in a family where many men became ministers. As a result, none of my extended family lived in the same town as another. I assumed that was normal. My daughter married a man whose family all lives in the same town in Massachusetts, which confounds me. To have a free mind is to recognize that what I believe may be just opinions I inherited.

Channing says: *I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith.*

My thinking about where one should live is a passive and hereditary way of thinking.

How else is my mind proven to be unfree?

Today we talk much about privilege, or the relative advantages that some of have because we are white. How much does that unconsciously shape our thinking? Many of you, like me, grew up in circumstances that made us see the police as friendly forces that keep us safe and that the worse they will ever do to us is sternly give us a speeding ticket. We are learning now, I hope, that for many other people, that is not their experience. We cannot change who we are, but we can become aware that how outward circumstances of our life can shape and control what we think.

Channing argues that to have a free mind, to be wise spiritually, is to free ourselves from such assumptions.

*As Channing says: I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstances.*

What else?

I know that I am an easily suggestible person. I follow fads and fashions. I like the pop song I hear most on the radio. I hit that like button a lot on

Facebook. IF i see a sleek car advertised, I want to buy it. I like charming politicians that I don't agree with. I am easily persuaded. Left to itself, my mind is easily taken over.

Channing writes:

*I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to human opinion: which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few.*

Marilyn Mosby is the State Attorney in Baltimore, Maryland. Her mind is free. When a black man in Baltimore was killed in police custody through cruelty, mistreatment, and neglect, it fell to her to decide whether to prosecute the police officers who were responsible. Think of all the pressures on her mind as she made that decision. If she had given herself over *a passive and hereditary* worldview, her family's history in law enforcement would ruled her work. If she *cowered to human opinion*, knowing that the police with whom she worked everyday might turn against her. She, on the other hand, "*guarded her intellectual rights and powers*" and saw her way to do the right thing.

Most people face a crossroads moment sooner or later in their life—a moment when they have to think for themselves and go against the crowd

when everyone else is going the wrong way. Channing is saying that one of the first goals of the liberal religious life is to train ourselves to stay true to what we know is right, even when everyone around us is going the wrong way.

So the first strength that we need to cultivate is self-possession.

What else? Self-possession is the path to living honestly. You need to be honest, and by honest, I mean that you have to live in the truth.

Liberal Religion and Unitarian Universalism call upon you to face the facts: our signature gesture of the 20th century was to insist on incorporating scientific knowledge into spirituality. We said that you have to know the difference between a scientific fact and a beautiful, even life-giving, truth-revealing story.

In the 21st Century, you have to face the facts of your social position -- all the ways that your social position has made your life easy and all the ways that it has not. You have to face the fact that your social position is shaping your perceptions of the truth.

So to live in the truth, you will have to be humble. You may be smart and you may be self-possessed but you don't know everything -- and you certainly don't know how other people see the world and how they feel. You have to

be humble enough to know that others see the world quite differently, and their perception is as true to them as your perception seems like “common sense” to you. So you have to be quiet and listen more times than not.

Honesty leads to Humility and Humility leads to gratitude and reverence. For all that which is not you. We sing an old hymn: *For the beauty of the earth* which talks about *The beauties of the Earth, the splendor of the skies, and the love which from our birth, over and around us lies*. Each of us would be happier and healthier if we held that beauty and splendor with reverence and with gratitude. We should hold the world and its people with the all reverence and care with which we would wash your grandmother’s wedding china after the Thanksgiving meal.

Channing says it this way: *I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstances, and is not the creature of accidental impulse: which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.*

I know that gratitude and reverence are about as controversial as fuzzy puppies and kittens with balls of string. Nobody opposes gratitude and reverence. But I have been in situations just this month when I saw no “radiant signatures of the infinite spirit” anywhere. I would bet that I am not

alone, that all too frequently we do not see the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit in our busy and distracted lives.

So where are we? I have taken from this text, five mental strengths, five habits of the hearts, five virtues, five goals that Unitarian Universalism asks you to work toward: Self-possession, Honesty, Humility, Gratitude and Reverence.

Do you see what I am getting at? The goal of Unitarian Universalism is not about building churches and congregations -- at least, it is not only about building churches and congregations. It's not only about building a religious community. It is about changing people, starting with ourselves. It's challenging others and ourselves to claim ourselves -- to lay hold of our own agency, our own power to act, and to live our lives with honesty and humility and gratitude and reverence.

There are also two other strengths suggested by Channing.

The sixth virtue is Openness. Channing says that those with a free mind "*open itself to light whencesoever it may come, which received new truth as an angel from heaven*" I love that word "whencesoever". I doubt that I am the only one in this room, who has to struggle to open myself to new truth whencesoever it may come, while guarding against the mental



usurpations of society. To be open to new ideas, and yet not follow every passing fad.

And the seventh strength we are called to develop is Solidarity:

(Channing) *I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering:*

We may not use the phrase ‘sets no bounds to its love’, but isn’t what we hope to communicate with our yellow tee-shirts. We stand on the side of love.

Channing goes further on this theme: “[the free mind]...recognizes in all human being the image of God and the rights of God’s children, and offers itself as a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.”

Solidarity, or Compassion, or Universalism !

I have come to the conclusion that this world is governed by exploitation and oppression, and that Life, including human life, is threatened by the imbalances of power; the decisions that will shape our future are being made by a few. If the future of humanity is at stake, the age-old question is again being raised: who shall be saved? Not from God’s wrath, but from but from human folly. Right now, it looks who will be saved will be the wealthy and the elite. Our future looks a lot like a gated community.

We are called to “set no bounds to our love” and to “sympathize with suffering”.

We are here to challenge our friends and neighbors with our words, and our actions and our lives to embody compassion and fellow-feeling and solidarity. To be sensitive to the one who is a victim in the situation, to watch closely and see the ways of oppression and privilege in the situations we are in.

These seven strengths are what UUism asks us to develop and grow. They are an invitation to us, and an invitation to live in a different way. What we ask is not complicated. It's simple and pure and clean and beautiful. It's living another way, it's living a better way. It is nurturing in oneself the virtues of honesty, humility, gratitude and generosity, reverence, openness, solidarity and self-possession. It's putting aside cynicism, and cruelty, and callousness, and boredom, and self-absorption and narcissism.

Our message is not only for the middle-class; it is not only for those who think of themselves as white; what we ask of the old is what we ask of the young, the straight and the gay, people of all combinations of abilities, people of either gender, or both, or neither. It is for people of all nations and all circumstances.

It is the work of lifetime, and the reward is a life well - lived, and a better world.