

Praise for the Journey:
 A Sermon in Honor of the 200th Birthday of the Reverend Augustus Conant
 October 16, 2011
 At Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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Reading

From the Sermon of The Reverend Augustus Conant on The Mission of Unitarian Christianity. A sermon whose date of writing and delivery are both uncertain. He preached:

Against all scorn of human nature, all contempt for its weakness, all denial of its worth, all indifference to its welfare, it is ours to maintain that man is ... endowed with a moral nature, and destined to acquire a Godlike intelligence, holiness and love; and that in every condition of his being, and every step of his wayward or onward course, God watches over him and cares for him with infinite and unchangeable love.

It is ours to preach this Gospel of the greatness and worth of humanity in the presence of all the debasement and wretchedness, the injustice and oppression, the selfishness and cruelty that exist among men and are done under the sun.

Can one who holds the Unitarian faith in the dignity of human nature and the worth of moral excellence and the destiny of the human soul, by any sophistry or pride or selfishness be made to believe that a man is really no better than a beast? That his fellowman may own him, and use him, as a soulless thing? That for selfish ends, for mere pecuniary advantage, one may rob him of his right in himself, rob him of intelligence and virtue, rob him of the glory and blessedness which are his heritage by the gift of God and not be guilty of a wrong?

It is for us to show that the highest possible glory and happiness of a human being is not in being served, but in rendering service – not in self exaltation and selfish indulgence, but in the exaltation of humanity, in uplifting the downfallen, in enlightening the ignorant, in elevating the degraded, in relieving the distress and misery of the wretched, and making the hearts of the sad and sorrowing to leap for joy.

We do not look upon the material world as literally under the wrath and curse of the Almighty on account of original sin, and all earthly enjoyment as a love of Satan for the ruin of souls.

We believe the world is still good and fair in the sight of its creator, and a fit abode for his intelligent offspring...

Fearless of angry denunciations of “politics in the pulpit,” it is ours to maintain that the realm of ... truth and righteousness is universal; that no domain of human ambition and interest, no sphere of human action, is outside of and beyond its jurisdiction...

It is ours to maintain that nothing human is above the majesty of the Divine and eternal law of rectitude. Its light shines on every path of human duty. Its divine wisdom and energy do and must enter into all judicious measures and means for the promotion of the public and private welfare of mankind.

It is to show that religion comprehends all human duty, all human interest, all human blessedness.

We do not regard religion as a sacrifice of the welfare and happiness of the present life, to secure the glory and blessedness of the future; but as teaching us how to live, how to improve the opportunities and enjoy the blessings of the present day and hour, and of each day and hour of a coming eternity.

Ours is a mission of hope. Out of our faith in the paternal character and infinite goodness of God comes the hope of the final holiness and happiness of every human soul.

This Gospel we are to preach; it is our denominational mission in the world, and woe is unto us if we preach it not.

Sermon

So, two weeks ago we celebrated the 500th birthday of Miguel Servetus, the 16th century theologian and martyr who had the courage to write about the unity of God and was burned alive by John Calvin. And today we celebrate the birthday of Augustus Conant, a relative youngster by comparison, born this day two hundred years ago. This summer you had the good fortune to hear the Reverend Lindsay Bates, minister of Reverend Conant's own church in Geneva, Illinois, share Conant's story and we just heard Colleen Vahey's retelling of a bit of the life of this preacher of our faith. Conant was an East Coaster who felt the call of the land here – the wide open spaces of the prairies and the open hearts of the people – and came here, he thought, to cultivate the land – but instead, he discovered that he had been called to cultivate souls.

His story and legacy are somewhat like that of my own hero – the Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who was in the next generation of Unitarian Ministers. Jones, who made vibrant the Chicago Unitarian presence, came from the rolling hills of Wisconsin. He served his congregations each in their own times – but setting out with his good horse, Roos, he preach far and wide throughout Indiana and Illinois. Jones also lead and expanded what was then called the Western Conference of Unitarians. In partnership and support of the sisterhood of amazing preachers who braved the frontier to spread the message of Unitarianism and Universalism he was instrumental in helping to found quite a number of congregations in the Midwest. In the Christian Scripture – in the same Gospel from which Colleen Vahey quoted earlier – the Gospel of Matthew it is written “you shall know them by their fruits.” We are the fruit of all these travelling preachers. Had Conant quietly tilled his farm, had Jones simply served his Chicago congregation, had Olympia Brown and all the others just kept darned socks Countryside Church would not exist. And they all took to the road at a critical time when the nation needed their voices.

Conant lived in a time in which the country was divided – slave and free, slave holder and abolitionist, those who believed in a punitive, vengeful god and those who yearned for something different. There were many who recognized that the democratic spirit was not simply political. In place of a lord God who judged and condemned and in place of men appointed to rule in the name of God – there was a new faith in a loving parent God, a spirit of love that bound all creation together and, and the God-like capacities of reason and compassion in the soul of every person.

Conant read the works of the Reverend William Ellery Channing. Channing is the preacher whose work, in the early 19th century transformed the word Unitarian from a label of heresy into a proud new faith. In the passage that our in-house Augustus quoted earlier you can hear echoes of Channing's own words, which were delivered at the ordination of the Reverend F.A. Farley in 1828 in Providence, Rhode Island.

“I do not dream when I speak of the divine capacities of human nature. I do and I must reverence human nature. Neither the sneers of a worldly skepticism, nor the groans of a gloomy theology, disturb MY faith in its godlike powers and tendencies. I know how it is despised, how it has been oppressed, how civil and religious establishments have for ages conspired to crush it. I know its history. I shut my eyes on none of its weaknesses and crimes. But, injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. I bless it for its

kind affections, for its strong and tender love. I honor it for its struggles against oppression, for its growth and progress under the weight of so many chains and prejudices, for its achievements in science and art, and still more for its examples of heroic and saintly virtue. These are marks of a divine origin and the pledges of a celestial inheritance; and I thank God that my own lot is bound up with that of the human race.”

Conant was deeply moved by Channing’s portrait of a loving deity and a human nature capable of living up to that love. Both men were wise enough to recognize that if you can change or influence the way someone thinks about the nature and structure of the universe you can change the world. If you change the image that someone has about the nature of God – from Lord to parent – everything changes. You’ve introduced kindness and nurture, moved from punishment to teaching. If you move from fear or hope in an afterlife, then this life and this world become more precious and meaningful. If you see all humanity as the children of a benevolent deity, made in that deity’s image, then you are compelled to work for justice, for equity. Conant had a gut level disgust for slavery – and as he read Channing and the other Unitarians he discovered a theology that explained his disgust and helped him to articulate a different paradigm -- a new theology – a new image of the nature of being -- a democratic one – in which there was no slave or master – in this life and not in some other.

It is this theology – this belief about the nature of life, the universe, spirit, and everything that opens our doors, yet every Sunday and causes our congregational institutions to be democratic themselves. It is because of this theology that, each person here is welcomed not for your race or class or sexual orientation or identity, ideas of theism or atheism – but simply for your own precious spirit. It is because of this theology that each of you can think and breathe free here – knowing that we recognize the inherent worth and dignity and insights of every person. This, along with the knowledge that we need not defer meaning to another lifetime – but have a charge to make in this lifetime an image of heaven -- these are our celestial inheritances – as Channing called them.

Divine, heavenly, celestial – we enjoy this inheritance that lifts our souls and yet it was not given to us alone – it is our to pass forward – to share – to preach. This is our good news, our gospel.

Unitarian Universalists are notoriously shy of anything that remotely smacks of evangelism. We don’t need or want people to leave the faiths that bring them strength, community, solace, and deep meaning or that provide them with an understanding of the world that inspire them to work for justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We don’t want to condemn the faith of others – we don’t and haven’t wanted or needed to tell people that they are wrong in their faith because we have also inherited a core faith that goodness shines out of every faith and every good and positive body of ethics.

We are so notoriously shy of evangelizing or proselytizing that the light does not shine out of our faith because we hide it under a bushel. We keep it too often hidden. We keep it to ourselves as though only a select few could understand it.

This is the faith that Mary Safford, Olympia Brown, Caroline Bartlett Crane, Ida Hultin, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Augustus Conant and others rode horses, hiked through woods, took trains, and risked ostracism to share -- because they could not keep it hidden.

It’s true that Unitarian Universalism is, in some ways, complex – I mean we don’t have a creed in a nutshell – but we do have an theology of unity and interdependence that is more than suggested by our principles and often articulated in the covenants of our churches -- whether in the very particular covenant of this church which we recite every Sunday or the covenant which

was the creation of the Unitarian Minister –the Reverend James Vila Blake – who served our congregations also in the 19th century and which is shared in so many of our congregations today: Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law, this is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

Certainly Unitarian Universalism puts a challenging personal responsibility on our shoulders. There is no one code book to follow. That might be handy – but, as far as I can tell – the good and faithful followers of other faiths – Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and others which do have codes to follow have to keep revisiting, reinterpreting, and wrestling with those codes generation to generation. So perhaps we are fortunate. Still, it’s an awesome faith that tells us that heaven or hell is what we create here and what we bequeath to our children and future generations.

This faith is challenging but it is neither too obscure nor too complex to share -- and the need of it is just as great as it was in Conant’s time. There are still people who believe that some are chosen and favored by God and therefore they feel justified in exploiting others. There are still those who believe that if there’s an afterlife it is more important than this life and therefore this earth and her creatures can be treated with disregard and used like a resource rather than ends in themselves. There are still those who believe that their faith sets them above others and therefore they can speak against those of other faiths with impunity.

A colleague of mine on the minister’s chat put a call out asking for ideas from other ministers about lies people tell about the faiths of others – like the lie people used to tell that Christian children were being killed by Jews so that their blood could be used in rituals, or the lie that Islam is a more violent religion than Christianity, or so forth.

I believe it is more important to talk about the truths of our own faith – because we keep them hidden. In the Interfaith work that I’ve experienced and that I’m now involved in here in the Northwest Suburbs, the joy is in the positive sharing. When we held the Interfaith Service on September 11 it was great to know that people were learning about our faith as we were celebrating all our faiths. There were a number of people who came up to me and shared that they had never heard of us before. When our people turn up with their “Standing on the Side of Love” shirts – and we hear others say -- Unitarian Universalists are the love people – our light begins to shine more brightly.

With more than one hundred million unchurched people in the United States and with most of them being unchurched because they were disillusioned by their faith of origin, with scores of scientists who avoid church because they fear an atmosphere of unreason and have their own innate sense of awe and worship at the universe – there is a need for our light to come out from under its bushel so that people know that we are here.

Just for the heck of it – I’d like to see a show of hands: How many of you found Unitarian Universalism through a friend? How many of these friends shared their faith proudly? Shyly? How many of you heard of it while growing up? Heard about it on television or the radio? How many of you found Unitarian Universalism by accident?

Why should we be shy of speaking our faith and sharing it?

In our national conversation it seems as though the theology of love and compassion are conspicuously silent. In fact – it seems as though the religious pundits who have been so vocal in recent year are quieter than ever. It might be embarrassing for them to say that God intends some people to be rich and others to be poor and that such inequity should be seen in our budget. I believe that our time, like Conant’s time, is a time of deep division. And it is very much the same division that he saw as well – and just as he spoke in his time -- it is now our time.

This faith, that has cultivated scores of remarkable people should be a public faith, not a private club. It should be seen from the road, heard in the halls of power, it should be partnered with other faiths helping to bend the arc of history toward justice. It should be visible so that those of the 100 million who are ready for the vision of an all embracing love, for an empowering community, faith in human dignity, a covenant of planetary care, worship of both reason and passion, teaching of equity, and an ongoing search for truth and meaning can find us.

In every new class of seekers here there are always those who say – I think I was Unitarian Universalist all along but I didn't know what to call it or that it existed or I've passed this church but I didn't know what it was about. We have been too long silent.

Last week the choir sang the words scratched onto the wall of a cellar in Cologne, Germany by people hiding from the Nazis. I believe in the sun even when it is not shining ... I believe in God even when God is silent. And I laid down the challenge that the God that can save us, our world – our children – our social ethic of compassion – our society that God is here now. In your seat – in every person here. The voice of that God is your Voice. That spirit which some call God and some call justice, compassion or love or which some believe defies naming need not be silent. That spirit speaks through me – though it feels immodest to say so – but it speaks through every one of you every time you speak for love and kindred virtues.

When Augustus Conant preached to his church in Geneva about the evils of slavery they began to debate and argue with one another. In fear of splitting the congregation, he left and went to Rockford. But his heart wasn't in Rockford. So, as the Civil War broke out he heard the call there and went to serve as a chaplain. On the front his Unitarian theology was new to the troops but they came to see him as a man of compassion and deep faith. Still he was harrassed by a conservative Reverend Moody who worked to discredit him. Conant endured and rose above this by paying attention more to his faith and work than to the man who spread lies about him. And at the last the character of his faith shone like the brightest beacon.

He was at the battle of Murfreesboro and the weather was savage. Men were suffering. Conant would carry a red flag into the battle to minister to the dying or to carry the wounded – from North or South – to help. A soldier wrote in letter to Conant's son, who served in the same regiment – “Never while I live can I forget him – as I saw him on the field with his red flag suspended on a ram rod marching fearlessly to the relief of the suffering. I can never forget the night of the 31st of December when he labored all the long night seeking the wounded. I can hear his voice now loud and clear in the still air crying “any wounded here that need help?” The words of that soldier bear witness to a man who followed his faith and lived it visibly – like the red flag he carried.

Today we have so many ways of raising our flag, lifting up our light. The pulpit, the paper, the internet. There are countless fields upon which people suffer and where we can be of faithful service – in the name of compassion and of our own faith. For Augustus Conant's Birthday and for all the celebrations ahead of us – our upcoming celebration of the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists – for the sacred inheritance of this faith. This is our good news. It is our gospel to pass forward, to reach out with. As The Reverend Augustus Conant said:

We do not regard religion as a sacrifice of the welfare and happiness of the present life, to secure the glory and blessedness of the future; but as teaching us how to live, how to improve the opportunities and enjoy the blessings of the present day and hour, and of each day and hour of a coming eternity. Ours is a mission of hope. This Gospel we are to preach; it is our denominational mission in the world, and woe is unto us if we preach it not.

Amen, brother, Conant. Let us teach and share it with our children and future generations and for all who have not yet heard the good news – that we are imbued with glory and have only to lift the eyes of our brothers and sisters – who are all humanity – that together – we can see that glory, that goodness, that love – we can see it, know it and live within it.

For Augustus Conant’s birthday – we receive the gift. For his birthday, let us resolve to give it forward. Not only here where it is comfortable – but wherever there may be souls crying out on the field of battle which, too often, is life. May we be those who cry out “are there wounded here in need of help”. May we be those who call out “are there those in need of light, hope, and love?”

As though lighting a candle on a cake, in his memory and in the vision of those who come after us let us burn bright the light of our faith and let it shine – free and visible. Individually, together, as leaders both lay and called professional – let us all ride forth holding high our light to shine brightly with the light of other faiths.