

## Binding to, Breaking with, and Bending a Bit

A sermon given for the 200th Anniversary of “The Baltimore Sermon”

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, Sept. 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019

In 1819, when the Rev. Dr. William Ellery Channing travelled hundreds of miles south of here to Baltimore, there was some concern that he would try to import his co-called ‘Boston Religion’ there. Boston Religion was essentially proto-Unitarianism; it tended to have a more optimistic and charitable view of both divinity and humanity, particularly relative to the Calvinist Christianity from which it emerged. According to Dr. Channing, Jesus was sent to earth to change our minds about our capacity for goodness, not God’s mind, and others had argued. The esteemed preacher explained as much in the 90-minute sermon he delivered in that southern city, and indeed, while he was there, he too changed some minds.

Even distinct from some of the finer points of church doctrine he challenged, Dr. Channing’s views remain relevant to our religious landscape today. Thankfully for you and for me both, though, I will not take an hour-and-a-half in the pulpit this morning explicating why. But it is fair the faith we claim today is not really so far from that Boston Religion he evangelized — and I am not measuring that merely in miles from the city center.

Our religious tradition is often called a freethinking one, and some of us might take understandable pride in that. Nearly every Sunday, you are directed to sing from The Gray Hymnal, that volume emblazoned with the silver symbol of a flaming chalice and the well-worn phrase the “Living Tradition”. These are some cues that as much liberty as we’re granted here, we are still bound to something larger than ourselves, larger even than our congregation here in Wellesley Hills, a tradition that lives through us all and also calls us into fuller life.

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Near the front of the hymnal is language adopted by our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, outlining what principles and purposes member congregations such as ours have covenanted “to affirm and promote” together. All of these principles and purposes and promises are nestled within “the living tradition we share”, the preamble states. While that living tradition draws from “many sources”, it enumerates six in particular. These include

“Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures.... Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us.... Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us.... Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love.... Humanist ...counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science.... earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life...”

Throughout the coming church year, I'll be preaching a sermon series addressing each of those six sources in turn, but before we launch into them, I think it's worth our considering what it means to be part of a historic religious tradition, albeit one as liberal as ours. Something I routinely told my UU students in seminary, much to their continued annoyance and routine disbelief, is that all religion is highly conservative in nature; it always has a preservationist impulse to save what is best in any given legacy — whether that be a rich storehouse of wisdom, a strong bond of fellowship, or a clear ethical mandate.

As religious liberals, we prefer to be forward thinking, progressive and event avant garde, reformers on the move. We tend to be impatient with the past on the days that we are not thoroughly mortified by it. Besides, shouldn't we simply be concerned for the future? The preamble in our Singing the Living Tradition hymnal calls on us “to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.” That requires a magnified scope from us; depth and breadth are not easily maintained in the mind's eye. When we so eagerly look ahead, however, we may lose sight of what we knew before, of the ground we covered, of places where our footing felt sure and steady.

In the early days of Facebook, as it was expanding at a dizzying pace and essentially shifting the social landscape of America today, the motto its founder adopted was “Move fast and break things.” Although a series of scandals caused the organization and Facebook leadership to distance themselves from that

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motto, in many ways that ethos has already won the day. Move fast and break things, yes — tear into the future, already. Before we have even satisfactorily surveyed what we have wrought, we look to what's next. And what's next after that... and after that.

We often want to break with tradition, and to be fair, many traditions need to be broken immediately if not sooner. It makes good sense to discard customs that enforce systems of supremacy, create punitive social norms, or routinely function to oppress or marginalize us or others. But there is also value to be found in reclaiming usable history amidst the corruption of the ages. Alongside disruption, we all want continuity. Alongside the novel, we want the familiar. We want ritual and improvisation alike. We have a human need to balance both tradition and innovation in our institutional and communal life.

While we imagine a faith tradition that might yet assume new forms and take on new life, most people in our congregations have only a rudimentary sense of our religious history. They are far less familiar with the Six Sources of our faith than with our two organizational forerunners, the Unitarians and the Universalists, who consolidated in 1961 to form our present-day UUA. But we are misled if we think that they invented a brand-new religion fifty-some-odd years ago. Instead, they began to merge traditions that date back centuries, and arguably, millennia.

In its 2018 booklet on The Practices of Spiritual Leadership, the New England Region of the UUA states: “To be Unitarian Universalist is to inherit a legacy... history, traditions, symbols, stories, theologies, ancestors in faith.” This booklet calls for us all to consider “Binding to Tradition” as a spiritual practice. It also calls for us to undertake what it calls “Faithful Risking” and to conduct “conscious, intentional experiments to fully live into our mission and purpose... Unitarian Universalist theology is grounded in the reality that revelation is not sealed, but ongoing. We are theologically called to ... openness...”

That is no small task, answering a theological call to openness. A few years ago, I was invited to speak on an interfaith panel in New York City, and its topic was religious perspectives on family. Early on in the planning stages, I asked that we all consider family in its broadest sense, including nontraditional versions of it and especially what we today call “chosen family”, and address that explicitly in

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our discussion. One of the participants, a religious leader I had worked with and admired for many years, replied: “Let’s not be so open-minded that our brains fall out.” That cut short our conversation, and in the end, I did not sit on that panel. His admonition reminded me how uncomfortable things can get when we openly interrogate one another’s assumptions, especially if it poses a threat to enshrined traditions.

In the marvelous musical Fiddler on the Roof, the title character Tevye sings an opening number that many of you here could hum along to in your head, called “Tradition!” He extols its importance to Jewish life in memorable song. “Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as... a fiddler on the roof!” By the end of the show, he is faced with a tragic choice in his family when his daughter chooses to marry a Gentile. He asks, “how can I turn my back on my faith, my people? If I try and bend that far, I’ll break. On the other hand... No,” he concludes. “There is no other hand.”

There really is no other hand without heartbreak; sometimes it is heartbreak that finally changes our mind, that opens us up to challenging and complex experiences. In decades past, UU congregations grew considerably when interfaith couples joined as members. Rejected by religions that had more rigid requirements around marriage, that made very specific demands on family life, they felt embraced by in UU communities that welcomed spiritual diversity.

Often, though, they adopted these UU identities only after they had broken with an earlier tradition of their own. How could it not feel paradoxical to ask all the people who came to us from religious traditions that became too restrictive for them — because of personal choices they made, identities they claimed, or social or political views they held as a matter of conscience — to suddenly feel bound to a new tradition? This was a chosen faith, wasn’t it, and not a compulsory one? Weren’t we called straight into freedom?

Yes, I suppose, in a way we were. Dr. Channing famously called:

“that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith: Which opens itself to light whencesoever

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it may come; which receives new truth... Which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.”

Yet the spiritual freedom that he described from the pulpit to many in his day was not so much a freedom from as a freedom to - to follow the call of the sacred.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the most significant sermon in Channing’s ministry, the one he titled “Unitarian Christianity” and preached at a the installation service of a fellow Unitarian minister. Next month, the UU History & Heritage Society will hold a convocation in Baltimore celebrating two centuries of American Unitarianism, a tradition that emerge in its own right in because Channing named it publicly and claimed it as his own. I will be in the city then, along with a host of other church nerds, celebrating the milestone. Until he reclaimed it, the term “Unitarian” was both a epithet and an accusation; it did not signify free-thinking type so much as the simply wrong-headed.

The scripture that Channing addressed in his sermon was a passage from the Epistles that in its entirety reads: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good...” The religious task he was attempting was two-handed: on the one hand, holding fast to important lessons from the past; on the other hand, put everything to the test. Channing had alternately been characterized as a “prophet of religious liberalism” and a “reluctant radical” by historians, but I think he was trying to find a new way of relating to tradition that involved just bending a bit. I believe he was trying to take the tradition in a new direction without breaking it; I believe he was trying to incline himself to it in a way that felt less binding.

We might try doing the same ourselves: bending a bit toward our tradition, bending it a bit toward us. Our capacity for independent thought is not diminished by our being in open dialogue from the vaunted thinkers of the past. Instead, such dialogue gives us a better sense of perspective and rescues us from the errors of “Presentism”, this fallacy that we have we have corrected all the errors of the past — intellectual, political, and social — miraculously without introducing any new errors of our own.

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When we move very fast, we are prone to break things. We may even break faith, and that's a consequence that is of special interest to me as your minister. Most of you here are happily unaware of a series of controversies that erupted in our denomination and among religious professionals in the summer of 2019, and it should probably remain that way. Clerical disputes tend to be tedious at the outset, and they only grow more tedious through extensive chronicling. Take my word for that.

Then I remember - not everyone in Boston was a fan of Dr. Channing, let alone everyone in Baltimore. It was not his intent to break with tradition in 1819; he had an intense dislike of sectarianism and division; he resisted schism. Instead, he wanted to reveal the potential that his particular religion had always held — and continued to hold for those who were sufficiently imaginative. In UU Facebook group recently, someone asked for a perspective on Channing's thought that could "make him relevant" again. What I wondered was if there was ever a time when Channing was not relevant to our religious life.

In this polarized political climate, Americans' opinions have grown increasingly inflexible. People understandably feel that these times are dire, that these days require action, not further thought, and the time for deliberation has long since gone. My sense is that we need a deep reflective capacity now more than ever and that these times require us developing that capacity more fully. One of the tensions that emerged from the latest series of UU controversies was whether ours was a new social movement or an actual religious tradition, whether ours was a faith or ideology. That seems to be the question being called in our associations now, and it routinely makes for uncomfortable circumstances.

As both a religious prophet and reluctant radical, Dr. Channing had a sense that people could change their minds, and indeed did. Beyond that, he noted, after they changed their minds something happened in their hearts, and then with altered hearts they took different actions, necessary actions, sometimes overdue actions. Our changed minds had an additional, undeniable power — they can actually shift the spirit of the times and bend our vision toward a new day.

Freethinkers can always make newer sense of their tradition and build on it for the sake of a better future; indeed, that's an established pattern of theirs. The

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2018 booklet The Practices of Spiritual Leadership explains that when “we claim our tradition and one another... in turn we are claimed. It is our practice of mutual accountability that is ever loving, ever trusting, ever forgiving, ever inviting renewal and an expanding circle of seekers.” Dr. Channing would no doubt agree with that sentiment, centuries later. May you be claimed by this tradition and may you yourself claim it proudly.

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