

## **William Ellery Channing: The Radical Theologian**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, May 3, 2020**

I remember a bright blue bush tucked away in the backyard of my mother's house. This corner of the yard and those robins-egg-blue petals became a bit of a sanctuary to me. As a teenager I spent time by this sacred bush exploring my own understanding of God and theology and what it all meant. This reflection was amplified after the tragic death of a beloved Aunt. I explored in my own mind damnation and salvation and God and morality and punishment and sin; I reflected and prayed to some higher being, initially my aunt, but a being that I began to understand as God. All while sitting alongside those blue petals. Is there a God? Is God a loving being? Does God care? Does God damn people to hell? When I first entered a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I found a whole building full of people on spiritual journeys, just as I was! Each person thinking, contemplating, by their own blue bush. This search for truth and meaning is one of the 7 Principles of Unitarian Universalism. My beliefs have changed since I first sat and contemplated by that bright blue bush. From experience and study and retrospect, my theology has shifted. And this is a true gift of Unitarian Universalism – that free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This has been an important piece of this faith from the onset! William Ellery Channing, a foundational figure in American Unitarianism, was a fierce advocate for free mind, for this encouragement to search for truth and meaning. We just heard these words in our reading, and in our story to the children.

Channing was a founder of in American Unitarian theology; his ideas played a crucial role in defining Unitarianism. Unitarianism and Universalism were initially two separate religions with two separate theologies – both with strong Judeo-Christian roots. William Ellery Channing espoused beliefs that were, at the time, radical! Including this free mind and a loving God. Channing dictated his theology in a groundbreaking sermon he delivered, 201 years ago as of this Tuesday, in Baltimore, titled, "Unitarian

Christianity.” I like to think he pondered by his own blue bush, immersed in his own colorful flower petals, searching for his own truth and meaning.

At this time, in the early 1800s, even the word “Unitarian” was radical! Christian Unitarianism, at its roots, saw God as one – not a Trinity of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit but as one, as single God, the Father. God as one means Jesus, the son, was fully human! What, then, was Jesus’s mission on this earth? To Channing, it was not the atonement for human sin. In Unitarian Christianity Jesus was sent by God to exemplify goodness, pureness, happiness, faith. Not to die for sins, but to awaken followers to goodness; to wholeness. These ideas Channing espoused were profound! And yet one of his most radical ideas, in opposition to what people believed in Calvinism, was the moral perfection of God. Channing wrote, “In no being is the sense of right so strong, so omnipotent, as in God... infinitely good, kind, and benevolent.” The morality and perfection of Jesus, and the moral nature of conscience in humans! Morality, goodness, kindness; these were key beliefs in American Unitarianism! While many people at the time believed that God arbitrarily chose who went to heaven or hell, Channing believed that God loved everyone. Where many believed that humans were inherently sinful and depraved, Channing believed humans were inherently good.

Channing believed in this God – this being who was entirely moral. A being with an infallible sense of “right.” God as “good, kind, benevolent.” A being Channing understood as a parental figure – not a ruler – but as a being who loved all of those in creation. This God who, Channing believed, created humans for “good and holy purposes.” Humans were created for good and holy purposes! Not sinful, not damned, not bad in any way – good and holy – inherently. I see love as a thread in this theology, a sacred thread, a glistening web, connecting Jesus and God and the rest of creation; love and goodness as this thread holds us all together; love dictating decisions, guided by morality; a thread connecting us to the idea of this God – this morally perfect being – who Channing believed to be watching over us, guiding us, imparting justice – just as a loving guardian would do.

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So Channing had these radical ideas that came to define American Unitarianism. The Unity of God. Jesus as fully human. The moral perfection of God. Jesus's mission on earth; not atonement for sin but as a exemplar of what is good. An emphasis on the morality of humans based on the morality and love of God and of Jesus. No matter how we understand God today, or if we have any belief in God at all, all of us are held together in a sacred bond with the glistening thread of love; this thread of goodness – inherent goodness.

So what does this radical theologian have to do with us as a church? I reached out to a couple of our founders to learn just this! In 1992, a small group of Unitarian Universalists began meeting over dinner, calling themselves the “Channing Gathering.” I see a group of dedicated folks congregating around their own blue bush, their own colorful petals, exploring their own theological questions. This group met to study and discuss the values of Unitarian Universalism – the religious and theological roots. In their gatherings they studied William Ellery Channing, this theologian who defined American Unitarianism. These gatherings led to the creation of a church – Channing Memorial Church. Since Channing played such an important role in Unitarian Universalist history, and his famous sermon which laid out American Unitarianism was delivered locally, in Baltimore, this group found their namesake in this radical theologian. And this is not a distant piece of our church history, but something that is still very much alive today. They found him profound then, and we will find him profound today!

What can Channing teach us today? We talked about this power of love: a loving God, Jesus as loving; Channing's idea that Jesus's mission in the world was modeling how to be a moral, good human. Goodness and love can dictate decisions we make every day – guiding our moral compass, guiding us in choosing between right and wrong, led, in every decision, by our morals. Channing calls this power “God,” and in one of his most well-known sermons, entitled “Likeness to God,” he lays his theology out in detail. Channing preached that we need to follow God; to imitate God. Channing wrote, “likeness to God is the true and only preparation for the enjoyment of the universe,” he wrote “likeness to God is a

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good ... surpassing all other good.” Channing saw God as perfectly moral, and encourages – demands – that we live this morality in our own lives; that we are driven every day towards moral perfection, towards goodness, towards wholeness. We need not have a belief in a supernatural being, a deity of any sort, as Channing did. All we need is an understanding of morality, as aspiration of perfect morality, knowing we will ultimately fall way short but attempting, just the same, to live every one of our actions to the highest degree of morality. Channing called us to embody “understanding, conscience, love, and the moral will.”

I think about the direct impacts of this loving theology today, during this pandemic, where emotions, fears, anxiety, and joy may all be amplified. I read an article in Psychology Today.<sup>1</sup> Author and academic Anna Katharina Schaffner writes that, during a pandemic, “altruism matters more than ever.” It keeps us happy, it keeps our spirits up, and it keeps everyone safe! We are all a part of this interdependent web and all of our actions impact all of those around us – this is amplified as we all observed the rapid spread of this virus. And we see this spread in love and kindness as well! We see folks aspiring for moral perfection, for goodness, for wholeness. Using their free mind and choosing what is most moral! For just as we see negative actions in the media, there is so much good in the world as well! Folks who are young and healthy purchasing groceries and running errands for those who are vulnerable, or chefs using their skills and talents cooking meals for those dedicated doctors and nurses, or musicians playing impromptu concerts for those who are quarantined. Schaffner writes that altruistic acts like this are what will get us through this pandemic together, as a community. Together, to the other side of this. And these acts need not be big! She highlights the importance of reassuring, caring, and nurturing. Even in our own homes. Even in the grocery store. Even when we are deciding how much toilet paper to buy! We can do this. And we are presented with questions like this every day – how can we be our best

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-art-self-improvement/202004/the-power-altruism>

selves? How can we practice kindness and compassion? We are presented with choices, every day – big or small – we can use our free mind, contemplate, and strive for moral perfection.

And this striving – this moral perfection – this is a choice. William Ellery Channing felt strongly that we were free agents who are constantly making decisions. Channing believed in the “moral strength of the individual mind,” and believed that this “moral strength” was the “supreme good.” He stressed independent thought and conscious decisions! He encouraged each and every person to sit and think and reflect by their own blue bushes – each exploring our own truths, decisions, and moral nature. This reflection guides our day-to-day living! As Unitarian Universalists, this serves as a guide for how we live our Seven Principles – those ways we covenant to be in this world. Some of this we heard earlier in our reading, in excerpts from his sermon “Spiritual Freedom.”

We have seen already his value on our first principle – the inherent worth and dignity of every person! Channing believed each and every person was born good, was born whole, could strive to imitate a likeness to God. And his teachings beg of us to live our 4<sup>th</sup> Principle – a free and responsible search for truth and meaning – searching, each day, for truth and meaning.

And he emphasized that we need to always grow, change, and adapt – responding to our surroundings and learning from that which we experience. Channing writes that the free mind “receives new truth as an angel from heaven.” A free mind is framed by outward circumstances; not accidents and impulse – this calls us to be intentional, calls us to be responsive and not reactive, to always analyze and resist falling into habit! We are always growing, changing and adapting.

Channing wrote, “I call that mind free which sets not bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering.” Channing calls us over and over to live a life of virtue – to have this dictate our every decision.

These are ways of living. These are the standards through which we make every decision, every day. Calling us to live a moral life, a life of virtue. Where everyone is inherently good. Where we encourage that search for truth and meaning. Where we embrace growing, learning, changing! We each have a free mind. It is up to each one of us how we are going to utilize this. I reflect on those years spent by that blue bush, that life altering search for truth and meaning, just as Channing urges. I invite you, in your own way, to find that blue bush, to connect with those beautiful petals, and reflect. May this guide our decisions and actions every day. May we embrace our free mind, and this sacred aspiration to moral wholeness.

May it be so, and Amen