

The Transient and the Permanent

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When I was a child, I was taken to church (willingly) by my parents “every time the door was open” (as they say). I loved the sense of community, of adults beyond my parents who cared about me, of friends beyond my sister and brother to be with. I even often enjoyed Sunday School, because of the stories. Sometimes, though I would ask way too many questions about the facts, or the mechanics of how did something happen the way it was said to have! When my questions were met with silence or encouragement to just believe, I didn’t like that so much!

Sometimes I enjoyed the sermons, but mostly what I liked was the music!

I was in the youth choir. I was in the hand bell choir. I loved the sound of the whole congregation in one voice, washing over me. I loved when the adult choir performed and the soloists,... even the one we made fun of ...who sang like we were at the opera... I loved it all.

I was child in that church. I was a teen. It wasn’t until much later as a young adult in religion classes at the big state university, and with my revolutionary peers that I would begin to question the “theology” of the words to the hymns I loved so much. It wasn’t until later that I realized there were parts of “church” that needed to be left behind.

It fell out of favor for me to sing the old hymns about a risen savior come to save me from sin. Consciousness raised, I replaced those songs with protest songs, with Peter, Paul and Mary and Bob Dylan and much later “womens music”. The forms changed, but the community building remained....

The forms always change...

Thrilled to be in this living faith that acknowledges and honors change, I was stunned some years ago when there was some consideration regarding changing the wording of the principles and the sources....Frankly, I was stunned that the majority demanded that every word, every phrase stay the same exactly as it had been...

Not quite dogma and doctrine as is offered by some other faith traditions, yet our principles and purposes, our sources, play a role in holding us together, in forming the circle that defines who we are... Eventually, they too, will change.

They aren’t the essence. Neither are our governance structures, or “they way we’ve always done it”. All those forms are like the Buddhists say: The fingers that point to the moon. Everyone knows it isn’t the finger we worship!

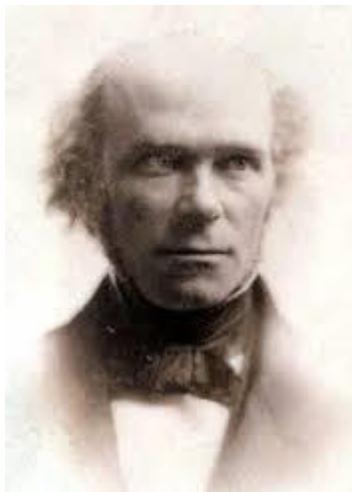
The feelings from those child hood times that music brought to me about love and care and community have stayed in my memories. (and some of those old hymns) That feeling reminds me of times and of people long

past, of forms out of favor, of all that is the essence of love beyond our immediate families, beyond all the particular communities that have formed and deformed us....

Moving in our lives towards greater compassion step by step involves constantly sorting through what is transient and what is permanent and trying to understand the difference and where our loyalty ought to lie, to whom or to what it ought to be given.

Almost 200 years ago, in the late 1840's thousands of Bostonians couldn't get enough of one Unitarian preacher by the name was Theodore Parker. He wasn't always as popular as he would become for a while in the city of Boston. What he did, for a time, a very important time, was help people sort through, tell the difference between the finger and the moon.

His name may be at least vaguely familiar to some of you as he was in the news (at least the UU news) not too long ago. President Obama had attributed the quote; "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" as many do to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, JR. Yet, MLK did not create it. As a few UU's were quick to point out the originator was none other than our own Theodore Parker! ...a Unitarian way back in the mid 1800's.



Perhaps you are familiar with more famous contemporary, Ralph Waldo Emerson? Perhaps you know that as a young man Emerson left the Unitarian ministry because he thought the denomination "corpse-cold"! He detected no passion, no activism, no "religious" spirit among the Unitarians who were taken by the forms rather than the spirit!

Frustrated, Emerson resigned as a clergy person and never again served a congregation as its pastor. As you know, he moved on to become a famous transcendentalist author and speaker.

Theodore Parker, was Emerson's contemporary, and he—as a Unitarian pastor, filled a large hall in Boston, Sunday after Sunday with thousands. There was nothing corpse-cold in his services. He was and he remained committed to the faith that values the freedom of the mind and spirit above all else, and he became the model of the activist minister.

His most remembered sermon, was one he delivered in 1841 entitled "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity".

In it he laid out, what was at the time, his controversial theology. That sermon and the person of Theodor Parker marked a significant turning point for Unitarians.

Earlier when he was a student at Harvard, he had been exposed to what we know think of as the very early forms of Biblical scholarship, understanding the text according to its original cultural and historical setting. Because of this, he came to believe that it was idolatrous to make the bible more important than a living and immediate relationship with the holy. He preached against words that had been written down so long ago to become more important than God!

At the time, what his perspective was called “transcendentalist”. Not all Unitarians were Transcendentalists and not all Transcendentalists were Unitarian. Yet what defined them all was the belief that the religious impulse, in other words, the desire for and the knowledge of something beyond the self, was inherently resident in all of humankind. Transcendentalists thought that the quest for “truth” was natural and universal and was satisfied more by the exercise of intuition than by reason, or allegiance to dogma or doctrine.

During the early part of the 1800’s while Parker was in the early years of his ministry, most Unitarians generally subscribed to what might be called supernatural rationalism; meaning certain religious truths could be determined by the exercise of reason, but to also be a Christian (as the vast majority of Unitarians were) one needed to believe that Jesus was more than human. The evidence that he was found in the miracles he performed.

Parker began to preach that one need not rely on a belief in the miraculous to hear and to live out the ethical truth of the core of Christianity, what he termed its primary and permanent message. Insisting that all human beings are by nature religious, he preached that the beauty and greatness of the religion of Jesus lay in its affirmation of the essential truth of all religions, which is simply love of God and love of man.

Religion was the process of awakening to the essential truths that live within each of us. In other words, to be religious was to touch and be touched by the ‘spark of the divine’ within.

In his 1841, sermon, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity”, he claimed that the essence of Christianity could be found in what Jesus taught about love, a teaching that anyone could teach and anyone could follow, even if they had never heard of Jesus.

He caused a controversy because he also said that one needn’t believe in miracles, nor in the literal authority of the Bible, nor subscribe to the various creeds, confessions or doctrines found within the history of the Christian church, or even in the Divinity of Jesus, to know and to live by the core of Christianity.

Essentially, he said that one didn’t have to believe in Christ, to live the religion of Jesus.

At the time, the Transcendentalists, (among whom were some women) included only a very small percentage of Unitarians. These transcendentalists were coming to value a more passionate, intuitive, natural spirituality. They were the young men and women, who like Emerson, objecting to the “corpse cold” version of Unitarianism that was acceptable to the social elite....objecting to the old forms...

Parker boldly challenged Unitarians to leave the transient behind and focus on the essential!

By 1845 a small group of Parker enthusiasts founded the 28th Congregational Society in Boston. It was a Unitarian congregation, but primarily served as a lecture forum for Parker. He regularly drew 1000’s, including William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Louisa May Alcott, Julie Ward Howe and many other famous progressive persons.

There was a growing hunger for a deeper, more immediate, more passionate religion that made sense...and that made a difference. His was a unique Unitarian congregation for its time, equally representative of both

men and women and racially integrated. In was in that pulpit where he became widely known for the passion and conviction he brought to social ills.

He talked about America becoming an “industrial democracy”, “of all the people, by all the people, for all the people” (a concept that later influenced Abraham Lincoln and could be heard in the Gettysburg address.)

He focused his passionate love of neighbor on cultural, social and political reforms.

He was a well-known outspoken abolitionist, who harbored fugitive slaves. It was said he kept a loaded pistol on his desk while writing sermons, in case those he helped on the way to freedom (who he sometimes housed in the basement) were threatened. He believed that women should be equal to men.

He said that “while the church exists to cultivate the heart, mind and conscience, it should also “ be the means of reforming the world.” It was one of his images—that the arc of moral universe is long but it bends toward justice—that would be adopted over a hundred years later by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. ...and quoted by Barack Obama...and many others..

He greatly influenced younger Unitarian ministers who admired him for taking reason to a new level, for his fight for a truly, free faith and his example of public engagement. He never left the Unitarian ministry. He continued to call himself a Christian until the end of his life.

In his 1841 sermon he said; “It must be confessed, though with sorrow, that transient things form a great part of what is commonly taught as Religion. An undue place has often been assigned to forms and doctrines, while too little stress has been laid on the divine life of the soul, love to God, and love to man...if we are faithful, the great truths of morality and religion, the deep sentiment of love to man and love to God, are perceived intuitively, and by instinct, as it were, though our theology be imperfect...”

“...Christianity is a simple thing; very simple. It is absolute, pure Morality; absolute, pure Religion; the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance....The only form it demands is ...doing the best thing, in the best way, from the highest motives....”

In a sermon entitled, What would Theodore Parker Do?, the Rev. Mark Ward, currently serving our sister congregation in Asheville said: “Spiritual exploration and the search for truth and meaning require a good deal of inner work as well as time to engage with each other..... But we do not fully inhabit our faith until we live it, until it guides how we interact with others and society at large, until it helps open our eyes to a larger view of the world and the duty we owe to each other....to all humankind and to the earth.”

Music perhaps better than theology, combines excellence of form, the mathematics of composition, with feeling and intuition...with memory and hope...with the soulful things that cannot be measured or regulated...

Words and forms, even the chalice, notes on the paper, are only the form, the fingers that direct our attention to the moon.

Let us gather again and again to worship, to lift up “what will live and give life” generation after generation..

The forms may change, may go out of favor and come back again, but what gave us life, what gives us life remains.

Amen, blessed be, shalom, salaam, namaste – the light in me honors the light in you...