

“Choose to Bless the World”
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Unity Church–Unitarian

**Worship Leaders: The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker,
Rev. Janne Eller-Isaacs, and Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs**

SERMON: Choose to Bless the World – The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

The true end of education is to call forth power of every kind. This spirituality of education guides our work at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California, our Unitarian Universalist Theological School on the west coast where this year we are celebrating our 100th Anniversary. Our school takes a special pride in our graduates who extend this spirituality of care for the soul into ministries throughout the world. Rob and Janne are graduates of Starr King and today this congregation is celebrating the ordination of Anne Romanczuk, also a graduate of Starr King and so it is a special joy for me to be here with all of you.

Another recent graduate of Starr King who, like Anne, is focusing her work on Unitarian Universalist community ministry by serving as a prison chaplain, wrote to me to describe the value of her Starr King education. Here’s what Melissa said:

“I experienced a liberatory pedagogy at Starr King School. Now I teach classes in a jail setting using that same pedagogical approach. I encounter at least 100 women a month, many of whom have been abused, all of whom have been oppressed. I treat them with respect and honor what they know. I encourage them to grow their souls. When they complain about the system, I encourage them to be agents of change in the world. I often don’t know the end results of my work but I trust the women leave here at least a little more aware of their own power and their connection to their communities.”

For today’s sermon, I want to sketch for you the contours of our Unitarian Universalist understanding of education – the philosophy that we embody at our school as we prepare people for ministries for compassion and justice and leadership in our congregations. I share this philosophy with you not just so you will know a little more about one of our important Unitarian Universalist institutions, but so you will reflect on your own religious life, on the life of this congregation, and especially on the importance of our Unitarian Universalist calling to make a difference in the wider world.

William Ellery Channing, whose words I quoted today, articulated the foundations of our philosophy of education and he did so in the beginning of the 19th century. His view of the purpose of education is an outgrowth of his understanding of the nature of the human soul. Channing’s theology was that the human soul – each one of us – is a bundle, an array of powers and capacities. Sometimes he spoke of these as “faculties of the soul,” but more often “the powers of the soul.” He said that in every human being the array of gifts is marvelous and in his essays on education and self-culture he describes the beauty, power and goodness of the human soul by enumerating what these powers of the souls are. He goes on and on for pages, and we would be here a really long time this morning if I told you all the things Channing said about how wonderfully we are made.

He speaks of the power of our emotions and our affections, the power of our minds to think critically and to recollect our history. He speaks of the power of our moral conscience, our capacity to discern what is just, and to know the difference between what is good and what is harmful in life. He names our capacity to feel beauty, to sense through music, poetry and art something of the holy, and he speaks specifically of our power to know and experience the divine in our own lives and world. He praises the power of our senses, our ears, our eyes, our touch and our smell, and our capacity to create things in the world, not as passive recipients of a world that acts upon us, but as active presences who shape our world.

To understand how significant Channing’s view of the soul is you have to know something about the context in which he spoke this way about our being. Channing was a child of New England Puritanism where what was preached to most of the people who had come to be part of his congregation and what had shaped him originally was a form, actually a sort of

narrowed form of Calvinism that said to be a human being is to be born a sinner, totally deprived of any capacity to know what is good or do what is good, at risk of eternal damnation, incapable of oneself doing anything to change one's fate, totally dependent upon the blessings or the curses of an all powerful God. To be human was to be a pond of the divine. And to be into this world was to be born into tragedy.

In contrast to that theology, Channing preached a revolutionary, radical understanding of what it is to be human. In lifting up the powers of the soul, he not only said that we were capable, powerful, multi-sided, complex, fabulous beings, he also said our soul bares marks of the image of God. He said the powers of our soul are the way in which we see that human beings are created in the image of God.

In some ways, Channing was reviving an older Christian notion of the character of the soul. Going back into early Christianity, the notion that human beings were created in the image of God was an important theological claim. But most often that claim was made in a way that divided human beings against themselves. Gregory of Nisof, an early theologian, said that within us there is that which is of God and it can be located in our capacity to reason and in our conscience and in our moral will. And also in us are all sorts of things that are of the devil. You perhaps could guess what things were on the list of what in us were of the devil: our senses, our desires, and our emotions. In this view of Imago Dei Theology, made in the image of God theology, the spiritual task of a human life was to win an internal battle of the angelic side of yourself and the demonic side of yourself. The goal of religious life was for that which is of God to triumph over, dominate, or destroy that which is of the devil in every human being.

But Channing in carrying forward Imago Dei theology, took a bold step and said that we are not divided between that within us which is of God and that which is the devil. Rather, the whole array — the whole catastrophe of who we — are is holy. Everything that is in our powers and capacities is a sign of God's presence in us. The spiritual task of our life is to unfold the fullness of our being, to allow all sides of who we are to live and to flourish. The purpose of education, in calling forth all powers of the soul, was to release the divinity inherent in each human being into its full flowering in the world.

"By unfolding the powers of our soul," Channing said, "God's presence is made manifest in the world. We are incarnations of the divine. Everyone of us."

I want you to notice three important implications of this way to understand the soul and education. The first implication is that, as Unitarian Universalists, we understand education to be calling forth the fullness of who we are into abundant flourishing life. For us, education is a core spiritual discipline. To be engaged in processes of learning that bring forth all that is within us is to be growing a soul, is to be giving glory to God.

So here in this church and with the new initiatives on how you approach your ministries and youth and your educational programs for adults, you are embodying in a wonderful way our Unitarian Universalist heritage of soulful education. What we now speak of as multiple intelligences is a new way of saying something very similar to Channing's old affirmation — by having space in this church where children learn how to bring forth the musician in themselves: the singer and the dancer, the scientist in themselves, the articulate poet they can be. By this kind of education curriculum, you are here calling forth the full unfolding of each child and making a witness to the sacred to all our lives. Education is our core spiritual discipline.

The second implication of this way of understanding education and spirituality is that our spirituality of education asks us to practice a spirituality that finds its deepening as we move out into greater and greater engagement with the world. There are plenty of spiritual traditions among the world's religious perspectives that have almost the opposite view of spirituality. In some traditions, the world is regarded as a place of evil just as Calvin regarded the soul as a place of depravity. And spiritual life is imagined to be a life that takes you — that removes you from the world on a journey to transcendence or to another world — a world after death or a world somehow after this world.

Make no mistake, the kind of world-denying spirituality has a very vital presence in our contemporary culture. You may remember Lindsay's book, The Late Great Planet Earth. That was just a beginning of a long series of very popular books from the Christian right that imagined that the destruction of this earth is God's ultimate aim, and the replacement of this world with another world. That the purpose of spiritual life is to find yourself among the elect who will be saved in the rapture. In such a vision, many many human souls are to be destroyed because they are evil and part of the evil world. And only a few make it to the transcendent better world.

But our spirituality moves in the opposite direction. Not away from this world as evil, but into this world with greater and greater engagement and joy. The powers of the soul that Channing describes, if you look at them carefully, are all powers of relationality and connection and involvement in life – involvement with the planet and with each other. Our senses connect us to the earth. Our emotions connect us to one another. Our creativity engages us in shaping the world. So the unfolding of our divine nature is also the deepening of our participation and engagement in the world.

This perspective of world-loving spirituality was beautifully expressed at the beginning of the 20th century by one of my predecessor theological school deans, Clarence Skinner, a great Universalist. In 1915 he wrote:

“We accept the world for the joyous place it was meant to be. We like it despite the fact belated theologians look upon it with inherited suspicion. For us, it is no longer the world, the flesh and the devil but the world, the flesh and God. Therefore, the dominant motive is no longer to escape from earthly existence, but to make earthly existence as abundant and happy as it can be made. Modern religion must sanctify the world. It must speed those readjustments which will make life here and now justify our hopes.”

Love for the world is the second implication of our theology of education. And the third implication is this: We are called to move in the world in a way that counters anything that inhibits the full-flourishing of any human soul. Our religious heritage obligates us to examine our world and see those structures that are like cement over the seeds of each human being, preventing the unfolding and growth of the soul. William Ellery Channing saw this implication of his theology of education in the 19th century. It was his view of his sacred duty and opportunity to unfold that led him to become contrary to the preferences of his own congregation – a strong outspoken critic of slavery in the United States. And he based his argument for the ending of slavery in the United States on his conviction of the sacred worth of every soul.

Channing also saw the way in which the industrial revolution was creating patterns of work and labor that, particularly for the working poor, were dehumanizing to people’s spirits. He saw how increasingly industry was asking human beings to be cogs in a machine. His address on education and his lecture on self-culture were given to gatherings of the working poor as a reaffirmation that life is more than being part of a chain of meaningless production where you are just one little piece in a machine. He said, “Human beings are not machines. We are glorious souls and each of our lives deserves to find its full expression for this is how we give praise and thanks for the gift of life.”

Other 19th century Unitarians and Universalists also saw the implications of this affirmation of the soul. Margaret Fuller was a member of Channing’s congregation and she recognized the implication of this way of thinking was profound for women’s lives. It doesn’t appear to me that Channing ever got this, but Margaret Fuller did. She said, “If we are all to be incarnations of the divine, then women must have opportunities for education equal to the opportunities that men have. And women must have opportunities to enter the professions of healing and teaching and law. And women must have the opportunity to vote and help shape the character of society. For if women are denied these, the presence of God in the world is denied.” Our 19th century writer, who worked hard for women’s rights, did so in a theology of education, a spirituality of the soul.

Horace Mann was a member of Channing’s congregation and Horace Mann as you know became our nation’s first great tireless advocate for the public funding of education for all America’s children. That advocacy of public education emerging from Unitarian Universalist theology was an expression of our religious faith of the sacred worth of every child.

We stand in a heritage that has worked for women’s rights, racial justice, economic justice, and public education as well as love for this earth as the realm of holiness. And these commitments of ours are needed now as much as ever – in some ways, perhaps, now more than ever. And it is important for us to recognize while these causes look like political issues or political agendas, the reason we work on them and for them is not because of our political perspective or our political party but because of our core religious faith.

Let us remember that our political engagement is an expression of our spirituality. But we are often excused of mixing, too much, politics and religion. Thomas Starr King, after whom our school is named, faced this criticism in the 1860s when he was minister of the San Francisco Unitarian Society and was actively devoted to traveling up and down California, advocating for California to join the Union Hawks in the Civil War in order for the United States to succeed at

ending slavery. His congregation wasn't always comfortable with him preaching this cause. And so he preached a sermon responding to his unrest. I would like you to hear what he said in 1864:

"I hear frequently the charge that I preach politics and that it will make trouble if I do not desist. But the preacher business is with spiritual laws and their application of the duties and the action of common life. If I think and see clearly how a great spiritual principal may be honored by the method in which you trade or use your money or exercise your genius or live at home, am I not bound to interpret that way, leaving it for your conscience and your insight to accept or refuse my interpretation?"

And he went on:

"Is there a person here who can tell me why a vote shall be excluded from all treatment in the pulpit if the preacher sees a spiritual law threading there? Let us understand each other on this point, once for all. You certainly have the right as well as the power to choose what type of preaching this pulpit represents. As long as I stay in it, it will represent no other than that I have just described. Not because I ever intend to preach politics, but because I feel I must preach devotion to humanity as the highest outward form of the gospel. And the obligation of doing the most good that possibly that can be done by all a person's influence, by his ballot as well as by her money and her words."

At Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, we strive to live up to the values of our forbearers, and to embody them in how we teach and how we prepare people for Unitarian Universalist Ministry. These three core principles are from Channing's theology: (1) reverence for the sacred worth of each soul and devotion to calling forth its full life; (2) love for this world as a dwelling place for the holy, this interdependent web of existence of which we are all apart; and (3) responsibility to be active in the world as agents that counter oppressive structures and build just communities that make possible the full thriving of every and all life. These are among core commitments as Unitarian Universalists.

But make no mistake, there is nothing easy about these values. We live in a world where counter principles and ideas, ideologies and theologies often run in dramatically different directions. There are theologies and practices afoot in our culture and world that regard many souls as expendable, that are willing to destroy lives in a view that some are evil and best done away with. There are perspectives that guard the stewardship of the earth as irrelevant since this earth will end. And our efforts to honor all of us in relationship on this ship of life that bears us all are often opposed with hostility and fear. We live in a climate and a time when our values are contended in the public sphere, and where our presence and our affirmation of what we most deeply believe is greatly needed.

Last week, just before we were about to celebrate our 100th birthday at Starr King School, we received an anonymous hate letter in the mail. The hate letter was directed at one of our teachers. It included an expression of opposition to a course we teach at Starr King on the Bible in which we invite people to bring their life experience to the interpretation to sacred text – particularly their experience of human sexuality to their interpretation of the text. It raised questions about our commitment to Islamic studies and it expressed hostility toward our teacher with a red "X" over the person's face. We live in such a climate where such hate is often tolerated. But it frightened us and we called the Berkeley police who came to our aid immediately. And they said the way to resist this kind of prejudice, bigotry and fear is to immediately let your whole community know that this has let this happened and then to come together and express what you do stand for.

So we sent out the word and just before we went into church for 100th convocation, we gathered in front of the school in a rally to reaffirm our commitment. And now I'm letting you know, as part of our wider community, and perhaps you could imaginatively stand with us as we stood on Thursday. There at the doorway of our small Unitarian Universalist school, Muslims and Christians and Jews gathered together. Faculty from many theological schools, not only ours, and students, Unitarian Universalist ministers from around California, and congregants from many of our churches. Children – babies in arms were there, family members of our faculty and staff, and the sheikh from one of the local mosques. We prayed together and sang together. Rev. William Sinkford, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, was there to stand with us.

We reaffirmed that we are committed to sheltering one another in community. That we will not let any one of us be isolated by hatred. That we will work for a world in which people of all faiths can engage in dialogue with one another. And we will pursue education that has open classrooms where all questions can be asked and our human experience is

taken seriously. And we will reverence the sacred worth of every soul. Place yourself with us in this multicultural, interfaith, multigenerational, global gathering.

We sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing:"

Till earth and heaven ring with the glorious sounds of
harmony.
Stony the road we trod
bitter the chastening rod
felt in the years unborn had died.
Yet, with a steady beat
have not our weary feet
brought us to the place for which our ancestors sighed.

Every Unitarian Universalist congregation, classroom, school and organization is one such place that holds fast to the goodness of this world, the sacredness of every soul and the calling to shelter of one another with justice and compassion. To be persistently present on this earth, connected, joyful, resisting all fear and hatred with the powers of the soul, with soul force, with the power that is in us which is the power of God.

Let us be together in this joyful and good faith of ours, loving ourselves and our world with every fiber of our being.

May it be so.