

Changing Time into Life: Channing and Self-Culture

A sermon preached by Carmen Emerson, Ministerial Intern
On December 6, 2009

“I have lost my faith,” she cried. I stood beside her hospital bed, on duty as a chaplain at St. Elizabeth’s hospital, and watched her face contort with deepest fear. Tears ran from her eyes and her mouth trembled as she risked the next sentence: “I don’t have faith in my doctors, I don’t have faith in medicine, I don’t have faith in people, and I don’t even have faith in God. I want my faith back. Please, can’t you help me get my faith back?”

Doctors had once again delayed her surgery, saying it would be at least five days before they could insert the pacemaker that would regulate the timing of her heart, but thinking ahead to the *physical* healing of her heart was impossible for her at that moment. All she could think about was the four hundred dollars-per-day cost of holding onto her room at the assisted-living facility where she had found comfort and safety, kindness and belonging. Over and over again she said to me, “Five days, that’s two thousand dollars, and I can’t afford two thousand dollars; five days, that’s two thousand dollars, and I can’t afford two thousand dollars.” Her mantra of fear continued. I waited; she had more to say. “I’m going to have to give it up,” she finally cried out, “and I love it there. But I have to give it up. And I don’t believe anything that anyone tells me now. I just want to curl up in a corner and die. I have lost my faith.”

A day after that hospital visit I was listening to the morning news on National Public Radio. A reporter was interviewing a woman in Texas, a staunch, lifelong Republican who had attended a Republican fundraising event where George W. Bush had appeared as the keynote speaker. She shared with the reporter a conversation she had had with Bush: “I told him I’ve had enough; I’m pulling all of my money out of the stock market, all of it.” Apparently Bush had responded to her, “Give me five more weeks; don’t pull your money out of the market. Just give me five more weeks, and everything will be okay.” “Yeah, right,” she continued, “like I have the faith to give you five more weeks. Sorry, I don’t have that kind of faith, not anymore.” And then she laughed, not a laugh of mirth, but a bitter laugh of disdain and disbelief. “I don’t have that kind of faith, not anymore.”

Five days . . . five weeks . . . five months now that my own husband has been out of work, but it feels to me that we have been vibrating with fear around economic issues for a much longer time. Does it feel this way to you, too? It strikes me that many of us are worried about money.

I stand at the bed of an elderly woman whose fears around poverty are expressed in teary declarations that she wants to curl up and die. I hear a woman—whose wealth means that she can cut her losses and run—express her fears in defensive laughter. I speak to ministerial colleagues around the country and hear stories of UU churches that have fallen thousands short of their annual budgets, and are facing severe cutbacks to staffing and programming because people are afraid around issues of money and begin to withhold it from their faith communities. I attend a class at seminary and hear a fellow student—an executive during the day and part-time student by night—share his surprise, his disappointment, and, frankly, his pain, when he hears another group of his seminary classmates express their gleefulness that those “greedy executives and Wall

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Street types” are finally getting what they deserve. The students’ fears are expressed as judgment.

I sit with eight other hospital chaplains, and the members of our usually disciplined group talk over each other, each of us with a story to tell about the fear we are witnessing in all these other areas of our lives. In our heads we know that processes and systems have failed, but in our hearts we understand that scared people don’t want to blame a system or a process; they want to blame a person because it is part of our human nature to blame another person. They—we—feel powerless against systems and processes; but holding another *person* accountable, there’s power in that, there is power in blaming, and the intensity of their feelings and their fears—our feelings and our fears—scares us.

Perhaps you have witnessed similar conversations. Perhaps you have participated in similar conversations. Talking about it helps, right? I mean, when we have something weighing so heavy on our hearts and minds, talking about it helps, right?

Well, talking about it *can* help. It helps us wrestle with issues we may not fully understand, and it helps us pass the time in good company until things get better, but I think we have to be careful because it is so easy to get sucked into the cycle of fear and blame, fear and blame, fear and blame. It is a contagious combination. And once we are sucked into that vortex of fear and blame, it takes a great deal of effort—a great deal of time, a great deal of faith—to pull ourselves, and each other, out of that powerful downward spiral and into a more loving, hopeful, peaceful place.

Now I want to pause for just a moment to assure you that this is not a sentimental sermon preaching platitudes of “love is the answer” and predicting that all we have to do is simply love each other through it and then the hard times will go away and we can all join hands and skip round the parking lot while singing “Kum ba ya.” There are some rocky passes ahead, and we are all smart enough to understand that each of our families may be faced with difficult choices and unprecedented uncertainties. We may be feeling vulnerable in ways that we have never before felt vulnerable, and unfortunately, we Unitarian Universalists do not do vulnerability well! We are a proud and hearty group, accustomed to success in our endeavors. We are a pick-ourselves-up-by-our-bootstraps kind of people, determined and resourceful. We apply that divine gift, our power of reason, to the challenges we face, come up with answers and solutions, and then move forward into the next challenge.

Except . . . except that, in times of such persistent fear, other instincts can overtake our power of reason. We get scared, and we instinctively move into survival mode. As a minister friend said to me earlier this week, “When we get scared our energies shift from the crown chakra into our root chakra—into our gut—and we’re all and only about me, mine, and survival.”

So what are we to do? I believe that we are all good people, people who want to stand strong in our faith and not forfeit our reason to fear and blame. We are people who want to “suck out all the marrow of life” and not “practice resignation,” as Thoreau reminded us earlier in the responsive reading. When we are crushed by fear and distracted by blame, how do we return to our compassionate selves? How do we restore our capacity for binding the wounds of vulnerability?

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I propose that we could accept some guidance and grounding from the wisdom and spiritual practices of our nineteenth-century Unitarian ancestors, who “ceaselessly” engaged in self-culture,¹ especially during times of crisis. Remember that they, too, were navigating unfamiliar territory. At the time of the “Self-Culture” essay quoted in our opening reading—1838—we had formally identified ourselves as Unitarian Christians for not quite two decades. We were in our infancy; we were in a very tender place as we came to know and define ourselves as a faith tradition, asking who and how we would be in the changing world, and how we would navigate the changing landscape of our nation. Recall the words of William Ellery Channing, from “Self-Culture”:

Self-culture [is] the care which every human being owes to himself or herself, to the unfolding and perfecting of our nature . . . Unless we are roused to act upon ourselves, unless we engage in the work of self-improvement, unless we purpose strenuously to form and elevate our own minds, unless what we hear is made a part of ourselves by conscientious reflection, very little permanent good is received.

I want to quote this line again, “Unless what we hear is made a part of ourselves by conscientious reflection, very little permanent good is received.” What I hear Channing saying is that unless we are engaged in intentional practices that strengthen and deepen our faith, it might easily abandon us—or us our faith—when the going gets tough.

The two aspects of self-culture as practiced by our nineteenth-century Unitarian ancestors were referred to as self-searching and self-forming. In contemporary language we might say self-examination and self-formation. I believe that these two elements of self-culture are balanced on *a fulcrum of time*.

On one side of the fulcrum of time is self-examination. So let me share with you the three practices of self-examination, practices that help us know and tend true self.

First, the practice of reckoning. This includes noticing the details of our own lives, an examination of conscience: offering forgiveness and pardon to ourselves and others, and consecrating ourselves to the work of improvement. The practice of reckoning.

Second, the practice of reverence. This practice is about gratitude. It is about pausing to notice those sacred moments during an ordinary day, noticing the presence of the holy in expected and unexpected places. The practice of reverence.

And third, the practice of communion with the holy. For some this may mean meditation, prayer, or other spiritual practices. For others this may mean being in right relationship with other people. The practice of communion is about offering our best selves to that which is most important to us. It is attention to the holy within.

Reckoning, reverence, communion—the elements of self-examination that balance on one side of the fulcrum of time. And I want to emphasize here that these are not narcissistic, self-help, self-centered practices. Remember what Parker Palmer said:

¹ Gratitude to ministerial colleague, The Rev. Rob Hardies of All Souls, Washington, D.C., who introduced me to Unitarian self-culture and provided much inspiration and fodder for this sermon!

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“That which I do on behalf of *true self* is ultimately done in the service of others.” And remember, also, that these practices were rooted in and are resonate with our Unitarian theology: our lives are sacred texts and we are participants in continuing revelation; we have agency in our own destinies; and—in a nod to our transcendentalist ancestors—we can encounter the holy within.

On the other side of the fulcrum of time lies self-formation. Again, I quote from Channing’s “Self-Culture” essay:

We have a still nobler power: that of acting on, determining, and forming ourselves. This is a fearful as well as glorious endowment, for it is the ground of human responsibility.

For nineteenth-century Unitarians, the practices of formation were formal and specific. Indeed, one of the most famous books of that era was written by Henry Ware, Jr. and titled *On the Formation of the Christian Character: Addressed to Those Who Are Seeking to Lead a Religious Life*. According to Ware, you must begin by reading—“As if your life depended on it,” he said, advising that one must “be at all times engaged with two books . . . one to keep your mind right, and your feelings in harmony with eternal truth” and the other to be of an “instructive character, to enlarge your knowledge, and extend your ideas concerning God, and man, and truth” (Ware, 65). In addition to reading, Ware promoted meditation, prayer, attention to preaching, and taking the Lord’s Supper; remember, these were Unitarian *Christians*.

Reading, meditating, prayer, preaching, and the Lord’s Supper. Well, I doubt I know a twenty-first-century Unitarian Universalist who would protest Ware’s advice to “read as if our lives depended on it,” and I doubt if we are content to be reading *only* two books at a time. I do not think Ware was encouraging us toward the self-help, pop psychology sections of Barnes & Noble or Amazon.com, though. He was asking us to read books that stretch and challenge, books that expand our minds, enlarge and connect our hearts, and deepen our connections to the holy.

Next, meditation. Many of us do practice meditation or contemplative prayer, and I feel certain that Ware would endorse such mind-body practices as yoga, chi gung, and tai chi as important spiritual practices. Certainly we know that Thoreau and Emerson endorsed walking and spending time in nature.

As to preaching—a special thank-you to all of you who come on Sunday mornings to hear the ministerial intern preach!

And as to the Lord’s Supper, well, in my almost two decades as a Unitarian Universalist, I’ve attended one Unitarian service where communion was offered. I know there are Unitarian Universalist congregations that offer a Eucharist service at least two times a year, and that this is a meaningful practice in the life of their community. But may I respectfully offer this alternative for non-Christian Unitarians: consider a practice of *spiritual sustenance*. What is it that you are willing to offer *of yourself* that will help sustain another person in their personal transformation? I think the most crucial gift we can offer one another is sacred listening, and sacred listening means the sacrifice of our most precious commodity: time.

Self-examination and self-formation are balanced on a fulcrum of time. All of the elements mentioned—reckoning, reverence, communion *within* on the self-examination

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side, and reading, meditation, prayer, attending worship services, and communion *without* on the self-formation side—all of these ask the same thing of us: a commitment of time.

Another nineteenth-century Unitarian, James Freeman Clarke, wrote, “If a person will be faithful to their highest convictions, to the best thoughts which God gives them to say, the best act given to them to do, *they will change time into life.*”

So I want to leave you with two questions today. First, in the face of the ubiquitous doubt, fear, and blame that will undoubtedly increase, *is deepening your faith worth your time?* And second, *do you have ethical and/or spiritual practices that help you turn “time into life”?* As we prepare to walk together over the rocky terrain of uncertainty, doing our best to navigate the territory of vulnerability, I pray that our individual and collective faiths may be strengthened for the journey.

And I hope if any of you are interested in engaging in any of the self-culture practices introduced today that we will find our way into conversation about bringing them to this wonderful faith community, as our refusal to yield to doubt and blame, as our offerings of love and hope.