

“The Color of Leaves”

Rev. Laurel Gray

October 4th, 2020

A few weeks ago I told you about my perch atop my family’s canoe, my spot at the water’s edge where I sought quiet and renewal. And today I want to tell you a different story about the sea, one about the birth of our Unitarian roots and the idea that all people can tap into an experience of transcendence.

As the story goes, a young boy by the name of William Ellery Channing went to church with his father one Sunday - this was in Rhode Island just towards the end of the 1700s. And in those times the preacher droned on for hours, telling of damnation and God’s punishment, as the people sat shivering on the hard wooden pews - shaking both from cold and perhaps from fear. This was a time when Calvinist theology and the idea that people are born predestined to heaven or hell was commonplace, as was the idea that God could only be known or experienced through the Bible.

Little William was terrified listening to the preacher, but when he and his dad got in their carriage to ride home, he noticed that his dad seemed unbothered, despite all the preacher had said. And when they got home, his dad went about his usual Sunday, putting up his feet and reading by the fire, as if nothing was wrong.

Little William was baffled. Clearly his dad wasn’t taking the minister’s words to heart. Clearly his dad had his own view of God and the world, and was not spending his day concerned about going to hell. This struck William as odd, since in those days they said that only the preacher could interpret the word of God.

A few years later, William was walking along the beach, looking out at the ocean, and he was awed by its power and magnitude. He felt, in that moment of wonder, that scripture couldn’t be the only way to experience god, to experience transcendence. William Ellery Channing came before the Transcendentalist movement that would begin a few decades later, but he was part of what would become our Unitarian lineage and the idea that nature speaks as much of sacredness as any scripture, if only we listen.

Unsurprisingly, William grew up to become a preacher, one who rejected the idea of an angry god that he heard about as a child. He said he opposed Calvinist theology for “proclaiming a God who is to be dreaded.” “We are told to love and

imitate god, but also that God does things we would consider most cruel in any human parent.”

William Ellery Channing rejected this idea, as did John Murray, as we heard in our story for all ages. As Unitarian Universalists, our spiritual lineage is woven of both our Unitarian ancestors and our Universalist ancestors. And both rejected the idea of humans being damned, of a wrathful God who could only be known through the Bible. After all, it was the sea and the wind that John Murray heeded as messengers of God, accepting that being unable to sail away meant it was time for him to preach again.

In our tradition, we believe that the experience of transcendence is available to everyone, not a clergy person who is deemed as having a more direct connection with the sacred. And we believe that no one is damned, that no one is unloveable - we see this theological strand in our first principle, that we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people. And though our congregations include people who have all different ideas about God, the idea that every person has inherent worth is something we share.

And as UUs we covenant to accept and encourage each other’s spiritual growth, as well as the free and responsible search for truth and meaning - these are our third and fourth principles.

These, too, are strands that speak of our connection with our spiritual ancestors. In our tradition, a minister is not someone with extra sacredness, but someone who the collective has entrusted with caring for the community, having deemed them capable of the task and trustworthy of fulfilling it.

As we think this month about deep listening, I invite you to listen for your own spiritual experiences, to make space for moments of awe and joy, to open your curiosity to what wonder might be possible.

I, like Channing, spent my early life along the coast of Rhode Island and part of my adult life in Vermont. I, too, have been stopped in my tracks by the light breaking through the clouds and dancing across the sea. I have caught my breath amidst the transcendent beauty of October in Vermont, overwhelmed by the color of the leaves.

And yet, my own experiences of transcendence, my own awe, cannot be replicated in another person. Like our reading said, “our individual relationship with spirit -

or maybe you call it life or nature or God - our individual relationship with that unnameable thing - "has to be personal and immediate for it to have authenticity."

I have heard from so many people, both within and beyond our congregation, that our spirits are weary, scared, angry, unsettled amidst the chaos of our time. And as Unitarian Universalists, we often think of ourselves as being a-religious, as being a kind of theological no-place, disconnected from any spiritual lineage.

But, in truth, Unitarian Universalism is not nothing. In fact, I believe that this lineage that says no one is damned, that some ineffable spirit of life and love and magic can be experienced in our very living - I'd say that's something that will help us remember our courage and fill our spirits when fear tries to take us, or single powerful men say that they alone know the truth, especially when we know them to be wrong.

So I ask you, what do you notice? When you pause long enough to receive some stream of renewal, some moment of magic, some light dancing through the leaves or along the water, does it stir your spirit?

As your minister, I cannot have that experience for you, but I can ask you if you've noticed the color of the leaves. I can help on the journey of collectively tending our spirits. I can meet you in the place of grief and pain and not look away, because I trust that your spirit knows as much of loss as it does of love and resilience.

See, as Unitarians and as Universalists, we come from a lineage of people who said that all of our spirits know of the magnitude of living, know something of autumn and magic, of awe and the sea, and that none of us, none of us, are damned. And that's not nothing.

Amen.