

Speaking of Reverence:
William Channing Gannett, a gospel for our time

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time...

Ode on a Grecian Urn *John Keats*

All crying, 'We will go with you, O Wind!
The foliage follow him, leaf and stem;
But a sleep oppresses them as they go,
And they end by bidding him stay with them.

Since ever they flung abroad in spring
The leaves had promised themselves this flight,
Who now would fain seek sheltering wall,
Or thicket, or hollow place for the night...

Misgiving *Robert Frost*

However any of us may or may not care for the poetry of Keats or Frost, I trust that none of us would base a serious objection to the verses above on the premise that leaves have no capacity to speak or make promises, and that urns do not hear; nor would we cite these poets as advocates of hitherto unsuspected abilities in pottery or chlorophyll. I invite us to hold fast to this recognition, at least for the duration of this discussion.

I want to thank Roy for an intriguing and most helpful unfolding of Gannett's personal story and the significance of his era in our movement, and I want to endorse Roy's call for an authoritative biography of this neglected figure among our spiritual forbears. As I have neither quibble nor elaboration to bring to the account we have heard, I have chosen rather to offer a highly personal response to Gannett's perspective on the theological covenant upon which our movement is established, which I trust may address the larger issue of this meeting, namely what is commonly believed among us today. I also want to thank the planning committee for commending to us Gannett's sermon, previously unknown to me, on *The Faith of Ethics and the Thought of God*. I read it with a mounting sense of recognition and relief; it is a classic statement of the theological epistemology in which I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist humanist in the sixties, and I submit that this sermon belongs with Channing's *Unitarian Christianity*, Emerson's *Divinity School Address*, and Parker's *Transient and Permanent* as an outstandingly eloquent articulation of a perspective that is structurally essential in the heritage of our free faith.

I want to argue that it is not possible to understand the Unitarian Universalism in which I was molded – and I speak advisedly; I consider myself among the first fruits of the consolidated Association – and to which I continue to commit my spiritual and professional loyalty, without a sophisticated and sympathetic appreciation of the theology that is exemplified both by Gannett's ministry as a whole, and by his hymnody and this sermon in particular. Yet I had no access to Gannett when I was a UU child; I first encountered him in

seminary as a figure in *Freedom Moves West*, and the author of *Things Commonly Believed*, for which irenic accomplishment he immediately won my admiration. I wish that I had sought to know him better then.

I invite you to indulge me momentarily in a recollection of a quartet of formative figures who were part of my childhood religious experience, and who among them taught me a thoroughly Gannettian understanding of the theological enterprise. As some here have heard me say before, I have come to see my spiritual journey as a kind of reverse commute; raised by staunchly humanist parents in what was at the time a primarily humanist congregation, I have only hesitantly learned to use traditional religious language to describe the realities of an inner life that has never owed anything to the idea of a self-conscious personal deity. When Gannett says, "There are today among us men, their whole heart throbbing with religiousness, who zealously deny our sacred names," my case is stated so exactly that I cannot even be diverted by the unfortunate gender anachronism.

The first of my theological influences was a contemporary of Gannett's; when William Channing was born in 1840, Louisa May Alcott was eight years old. Like him, she was nursed in the New Testament liberalism of Channing, as well as the Transcendentalist ether of Emerson; like him, she had a second generation's pragmatism about the institutional implications of the human condition. When she was thirteen, Louisa composed a somewhat mannered Victorian prayer-poem, which reaches an unconventional theological conclusion that prefigures what Gannett will outline in his presentation to the Illinois Fraternity forty years later. It also constitutes one of my earliest exposures to a language of reverence that seemed personally authentic to me, and I cherished it as a guilty secret from my humanist religious educators throughout my pre-adolescent years.

A little kingdom I possess
where thoughts and feelings dwell,
And very hard I find the task
of governing it well;
For passion tempts and troubles me,
A wayward will misleads,
And selfishness its shadow casts
On all my words and deeds.

How can I learn to rule myself,
to be the child I should,
Honest and brave, nor ever tire
Of trying to be good?
How can I keep a sunny soul
To shine along life's way?
How can I tune my little heart
To sweetly sing all day?

Dear Father, help me with the love
that casteth out my fear;
Teach me to lean on thee, and feel
That thou art very near,
That no temptation is unseen

No childish grief too small,
Since thou, with patience infinite,
Doth soothe and comfort all.

I do not ask for any crown
But that which all may win,
Nor seek to conquer any world
Except the one within.
Be thou my guide until I find,
Led by a tender hand,
Thy happy kingdom in myself
And dare to take command.

My Kingdom

Louisa May Alcott

In this, as well as in her stories of children whose spiritual lives are integral to their developmental narratives, Louisa illustrated for me a religion of ethical passion and inner depth independent of, but not in opposition to, the mythical and ritual vocabularies of any particular culture. From her, I learned what I would later find named in the Greek tradition *Sophrosyne*; the virtue of self-awareness and self-control in the service of intention. To be good, for her as for Gannett, has not so much to do with rules, authority, or rewards, whether human or divine, as it does with an interior aspiration and felt yearning which points beyond the self, but can never originate from external demands. There is an assent to a summoning accountability that is the essence of morality, which intimates some holy possibility, but cannot be reduced to mere obedience. Spiritual maturity lies finally in our daring to take command of the conquered world within, not an eternal childishness. It was this hope for an emergent crown of inner moral order that made me skeptical of the LRY gospel of sex, drugs, and rock and roll as it was offered to me – it was too self-indulgent; Louisa would not have approved.

The congregation in which I grew up began as one of the circle of fellowships around the suburbs of Washington, DC, spun off in response to the powerfully fruitful ministry of A. Powell Davies at All Souls Church in the heart of the capitol. We were the church named in his memory, and although I never saw him in person, his presence was that of a sort of patron saint, a larger than life influence of whom we were called to be worthy. Reprints of his pamphlets, as well as the editions of his collected sermons and prayers, were always accessible around the building; together with *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, they constituted my early scriptures. Particularly his prayers, gathered into a slender volume entitled *The Language of the Heart*, seem to me still the Psalms of our heritage, and they too helped to shape my development as a Unitarian of Gannett's mold. Although he uses the structural convention of prayer, and the grammar of direct address, the target of Davies's utterance is clearly the human reality of his hearers, which he touches with piercing power, appealing to the same self-recognition and longing aspirations invoked by Gannett. One might quote at random; these examples will suffice.

O God, we have prayed so long for faith without courage,
for peace without striving, for solace without righteousness,
and in our flight from life have fled from Thee.
Now, we realize how impossible have been the things for which we have asked.

How can we have Thy presence and reject Thy truth?
Or seek Thy comfort and refuse to serve Thee?
How can we love Thee in Thine unseen temple and not love Thee in our fellow-men?
We have turned away, O God, from what was calling to us,
 imploing Thee to save us from the need to do Thy will.
We craved protection.
We wanted to be shielded from reality.
O Thou to whom we prayed for shelter, and there was none,
 teach us now to pray a braver prayer.

O God, from whom we seek concealment of our treason and shelter for our lies,
 teach us that conscience gives no quarter, and why it cannot;
 and that the truth we banish leaves us empty of all meaning;
 and that the good we would not love returns to break our hearts.

Help us, O God, never to seek the forgiveness which would destroy us:
 absolve us from nothing
 until there is nothing from which we need to be absolved.

To such prayers, it seems to me, no humanist in his or her right mind should object; they do not argue for the necessity of a personal god any more than Frost means us to accept the proposition that foliage talks. This is not to say what Davies himself did or did not believe, only that there is a position – the position from which, and for which, Gannett pleaded – where the language of the heart seeks to express the human experience of reverence using all the tools at its disposal, and hoping to be heard in the sympathetic candor of a shared longing for larger life. I have never had the slightest inkling of an intentional creator or transcendent consciousness, yet I have always resonated in the deepest fibers of my being to the prayers of A. Powell Davies. There are any number of both humanists and theists in our movement today who would have it that such a claim demonstrates only my own theological incoherence. I take refuge in the work and words of William Channing Gannett, and claim his heritage as my legitimate, enduring place in this tradition.

The third of those who prepared me to structure my religious life upon this foundation was the revolutionary of the Sunday School curriculum, Sophia Fahs. I came to understand the perspective that she shared with Verna Hills Bayley, Bertha Stevens, and other authors of the Beacon Series books in part because my mother was a perpetual figure in the RE program, and I always found the teachers guides that I could peruse when she was preparing for a class rather more interesting than the texts intended for the students. From Martin and Judy through Long Ago In Many Lands to Jesus the Carpenter's Son and Akhenaten, the Fahs approach taught me that the spiritual life is an organic developmental process that is as natural, intimate, and ordinary as physical, emotional, or intellectual growth. I was expected to find wonder in the woods, in contemplating dead birds and bean seedlings, more than in exotic accounts of the mighty acts of a biblical god, and I did. By her guidance, I was exposed to stories about creation and spiritual heroes and religious practices on a basis of cultural equal opportunity; all were open to me as a member of the human race, and all were subject to my examination both for rational probability and for moral implication. I came to understand that the language of reverence included any number of dialects, all of which might be entered into with comprehension through respectful and sympathetic attention. The definition of a reasonable person was the willingness not to privilege any one religious

vocabulary. Humanism, having as it seemed no such vocabulary of its own, was responsible in all cases to exercise the exquisite care of a guest handling a host's fragile treasures.

The last of my four instructors was the poet of humanism, Ken Patton. From his work published in the hymnal I received the family treasures of an articulate agnosticism, so urgent of utterance that it had no time for theological debate. If there was an argument to be made, victory would be achieved not by intellectual precision, but by persuasive energy and eloquent breadth, not unlike Gannett's. Those who would move our collective journey forward, Patton taught me by example, must

... build temples,
 and adorn them with intimations of longer journeys you cannot take,
 and images of countries you may never enter.
In far-off times others will put their carvings beside yours,
 and light candles where long ago yours burned away.
In their celebrations there will be a lingering of your questions and solicitations.
The rafters and pillars will remember your dreams,
 And your children will discover the beauty of your ancient hands.

Such images bred in me a devoted loyalty to the past not only of our own faith, but of humanity's religious evolution as a whole, as well as a confidence in the process of theological evolution by which my children's "questions and solicitations" might be different from, but still organically connected to, my own. Patton, more than anyone else, seemed to promise that there was something yet to be achieved by those of us born into the house of spiritual freedom; that we might look beyond the exodus stories so powerful to our come-outer parents, toward a newly possible spiritual maturity that might begin where their journeys ended.

We are seekers of the fellowship of life and of death,
 which measures its ever-changing content and shape,
 breeding the laughter and hunger of our escaping years,

he told me, and assured me that I was part of a living moral community in the shared

...solitude of those who, with us, seek their hidden reckonings.

He called us to worship – a word fully appropriate to humanists in his view – in terms that seem to echo Gannett across the years:

Let us worship, not in bowing down,
 not with closed eyes and stopped ears.
Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings,
 with the full outstretching of our spirits.
Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding,
 with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body,
 to those who have fallen in love with life.

But as to names, let those for whom the inadequacy of all words about the Infinite dims truth say neither "God", nor "Love", nor "Father". Let such keep silence; and let their silence be revered as reverence by those who find the poverty of words less poor than silence to voice their sense of the Mystery and Blessedness. As reverently let those who choose the silence bear with those who break it. Most certainly the One that moves within the crystallizing atoms as in the rhythms of history, within the shining suns as in the Light that Lighteth every soul of man – most certainly this omnipresent Moral Energy is not a mighty patriarch, is not the very tenderest Mother. The Fact transcends all human dreams of personality. Our many names at utmost best are only poems, emblems, symbols – eidola to help the mind. "Idols" – let the word be spoken fearlessly; these names are but idols of the mind. But know what "idol" means – the secret lies revealed in eidolon, the Greek original – an image serving to make thought more visible to consciousness. Man scarcely thinks at all except in idols. Language is one vast compact of fragmentary images. With this imaging necessity upon us, it does not long avail us to dismantle our cathedrals, whitewash frescoes, and forswear symbolism in the interest of "truth". Man has a birthright to poetry and symbolism, and they will not be denied out of him. If denied in one set of terms, they are sure to come back before long in another.

True, ever and again we need our Puritans to denounce the symbol, to save from over-use and misuse of the helpful idols, to rescue us from an "idolatry". There are today among us men, their whole heart throbbing with religiousness, who zealously deny our sacred names. Since it is morality alone that makes the "god" so real, so live, so near and dear to us, we ought to thank whoever emphasizes that supremely. These "Ethical Culture" friends of ours will deepen spiritual perception in us. They are prophets of the living God, whose name, for the God's sake, they would fain forbid to men; even as in elder time, for the God's sake, prophets forbade his graven image. But, grateful for and not unmindful of their warning, we need not go out to dwell with these reformers in the dry lands of their prose. There is a nobler way. Be braver, all! Be fairer, too! Say "Our Father", "Christ", "Madonna"; yet, saying these, beware! We easily may make them idols in the hurtful sense, mistaking form for substance. Forget not they are symbols, and all inadequate to name the God we worship, the Life and Love in which we live, of which we are a part. Or refuse to say "Our Father", if truthfulness forbid you; but beware as much in that refusal! For to fear idols for oneself, or to rave at them in others, is still to fear and rave at – idols! Mistake not *thou* the form for substance. To put both warnings into one, beware of deeming it either the essence of religion, or the essence of superstition, to say "God" and "Father". To think it either is to confound the names with realities – and *that* is the superstition, *that* the sacrilege.

To be silent according to the spiritual aesthetic of religious humanism is not to be without reverence; it is to express a reverence for the experienced summons to truth and goodness so urgent that it will not tolerate metaphorical approximation. Moreover, it is not a permanent commitment to the dry lands of prose. At its best, it embraces in sympathetic recognition all authentic expressions of reverence, whatever their idiom, for if we are genuinely humanists, then nothing human can be alien to us. It is this connection that makes us, like Gannett, unwilling on principle to draw boundaries around the legitimate possible expressions of experienced spiritual truth in our communities.

