

Unitarians, Universalists, and Schleiermacher

Burton D. Carley
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What is Religion?

"The mystery of life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced."
-- Aart van der Leeuw

The word *ontology* should have the dust of obsolescence shaken from it. Perhaps it suffered from that common ailment of philosophy known as abstraction. That such a word even exists in our vocabulary is a testimony to the wonder that we are. It speaks to the mystery of life, the miracle that we are, and the astonishing fact that there is something rather than nothing.

Out of the smithy of the universe we came; we who are born and must die. It is a remarkable thing that we are born and not made. This by itself is reason enough for humanity to enter into its temples and sanctuaries. We come to worship because we are creatures in a created world that we have not earned or deserved, and the universe is not of our own making.

Basic to our being human is the recognition of our dependence upon a creative power and processes beyond our own agency. Now there is a word, *dependent*, that seldom passes progressive lips. In our often therapeutic orientation, dependency has a negative psychological connotation. It also rubs up against the pride of self-reliant individualism. Yet, for Friedrich Schleiermacher, the feeling of dependence accounts for the genesis of religion. It is the religious side of self-consciousness. This intuition that as finite creatures we are dependent upon the infinite, upon the Universe which transcends all oppositions and spins out creative possibility, establishes religion. Religion stands on its own and cannot be reduced to morality or knowledge. The reality and immediacy of religious experience is the basis of faith.

We are more than big brained mammals with opposed thumbs who walk upright. We are more than tool makers and fire starters. We are more than the architects of language. For all our laurels as *Homo sapiens*, we are something more profound. We are *Homo religiosus*. By positing the origin of religion in both feeling and the natural world, Schleiermacher escaped the horns of his dilemma. Against Enlightenment rationalism he rescued religion from being demoted to the assistant for ethics and moral behavior, and from its antagonistic relationship with science. Against orthodox Christianity he rescued religion from supernaturalism, and from being reduced to theological formulas and institutional forms.

Between arid Deism and argumentative orthodoxy, Schleiermacher found a third way grounded in what he called piety. Piety is a feeling, a response to the consciousness of the roots of our nature imbedded in the Infinite and Eternal. It is the inward recognition that we live and have our being in Divinity or the Universe or the World-Spirit or God. It is the feeling that the same being and life that flows through the individual is found in All. It is surrender to the experience of Wholeness.

Piety is another word seldom heard among us. I have not noticed it on a top ten list of Unitarian Universalist values, nor for that matter *surrender*. Perhaps we associate piety with that tongue-in-cheek rendering of a Puritan as person who fears that someone, somewhere, is having a good time. In this way piety is related to austerity and repression. Perhaps we have taken to heart all those encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees in the Gospels that often ended with the pious ones being called hypocrites, and not in a polite tone.

I remember a time when serving on the UUA Board of Trustees how our president, Bill Sinkford, unintentionally created an Association wide controversy by promoting the use of reverence in our worship and vocabulary. Schleiermacher once described piety as a glorious reverence as exalting as humbling which is our relation to the Whole. This reminds me of the time I preached a sermon on humility at a GA worship service. The congregation was largely unmoved. Perhaps it was the early hour. Perhaps it was the preacher and not the topic.

For over two decades I have been traveling annually to Transylvania to be in relationship with the partner church of the Church of the River, and it took awhile before I could recognize what was so spiritually attractive. I had no interest in reforming our brothers and sisters of faith, bending them toward the likeness of American Unitarian Universalism. I was not motivated to inform them of their own needs, or to define our relationship primarily in terms of material assistance. After my first visits I could no longer be considered a tourist. What I finally came to understand was that I received something from them I rarely experience in the States. I can only call it the feeling of piety, the attitude of religious sincerity that is not casting about for its identity, a warm reverence, and humility at home and in worship bereft of the need to prove relevance or importance. There is little discourse on the topic of religion and more expression of being religious without apology. There are, of course, culturally differences that account for some of this, yet I remain surprised at the discovery of a spiritual bond based on piety.

Religion, for Schleiermacher, is an inner experience related to piety. True religion is never secondhand but "a sense and taste for the Infinite." (*On Religion*, originally published 1898, Forgotten Books, 2012, p. 30) "It is the first contact of the universal life with an individual." (ibid, p. 43) And "...the aim of all religion is to love the World-Spirit and joyfully to regard his working...." (ibid, p. 65)

According to Professor Luke Timothy Johnson of Emory University, there are three major approaches to the definition of religion. (*Early Christianity: The Experience of the Divine*,

The Teaching Company, 2002, p. 8) The essential definition seeks to identify a central aspect of religion to distinguish what it is and is not. The functional definition seeks to describe what a religion does for the individual or for the group. The descriptive definition does not begin with an idea about what religion is, as illustrated by doctrines, beliefs, rituals, sacred texts. Nor does it begin with the purposes religion serve like social solidarity and identity. Rather, its focus is on the phenomenology of religion. In this approach religious experience plays a prominent role. Religion may be thought of as the experience of what is Holy or Real or Ultimate or the Ground of Being, and convictions about the experience that issue forth into a way of life.

One quality that identifies Schleiermacher as a liberal in the Protestant tradition is that he begins religion not with divine revelation from on high, but down below in human experience. The feeling of absolute dependence gives rise to the Other, but direct knowledge of God is not possible. We cannot remove ourselves from the World and spy on God. Therefore he uses a variety of terms for the Holy, and cautions that "it is not necessary that the Deity should be presented as also one distinct object." (On *Religion*, p. 50) Schleiermacher was ever vigilant against anthropomorphic conceptions of God.

Religious experience is at the heart of early Christianity. Jesus clearly had some sense of a call as prophet to his people that included a highly developed relationship with his God. The uniqueness of Jesus as Christ for Schleiermacher is not found in metaphysical doctrines or miraculous origins. It is found in his "God-consciousness" so highly attuned that he became a mediator for that consciousness to a supreme degree. Sin is not inherited from Adam and Eve but the lack of piety or the absence of the feeling of being joined to All in humanity and the Universe. Sin is separation and Jesus becomes the vehicle through which one may come to gain union with the Holy and humanity.

The beginning of Christianity takes place in what we call "the resurrection experience." One can say that the life and teachings of the historical Jesus only became important after what God is claimed to have done through his death and resurrection. In the phenomenological approach to religion the question is not how or if a resurrection took place. Rather, the key is the claim of powerful encounters with the risen Christ. The conviction of the experience is that Jesus became the source of the "life-giving Spirit" (I Cor. 15:45). Jesus mediated the power of God experienced as personal, transcendent and transforming. The experience and conviction translated into changed hearts and lives.

One may interpret the remarkable spread of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean not as the triumph of winning minds through argument, but as the efficacy of its spiritual power felt in the lives of people. The gift of the Holy Spirit, an experience of transcendent power, marked all its rituals and expressions from baptism to speaking in tongues to common meals to healing to prayer and visions. The outcome was a sense of empowerment that enabled people to overcome difficulties and enter into a new kind of life.

As Christianity moved out from its origins, became an imperial religion, developed its institutional structures, established its orthodoxy against a variety of challenges, and consolidated its political power, "official" Christianity represented by the Roman Catholic Church in the West eclipsed "popular" Christianity. While illiterate people were drawn to the Jesus of history, the Roman Catholic Church attracted priests and bishops from the cultured and educated ranks of society. They were predisposed to the rational, the textual, and the ordered, rather than the popular expressions of Christianity that harbored the charismatic and experiential.

In the medieval period Catholicism entertained more popular religion with the rise of a sacramental system, the worship of saints and relics, and the prominence of pilgrimages. The 16th century Protestant Reformers objected to what they considered "superstitious" in the Church like the traffic in relics and indulgences. They made central the Scripture and eliminated the sacramental tradition. They put on academic robes rather than vestments.

The 18th century Enlightenment movement further critiqued Christianity for its supernaturalism, beliefs in miracles and healing, and anything that could not pass the scrutiny of reason and empirical methods. Knowledge was no longer limited to the purview of the Church and became specialized into different branches without central control. The development of science and the study of nature demoted God from a divine power that can be experienced to an idea for debate. Deism became a respectable way to both have and not have God. The value of Christianity was found not in its faith claims but in its capacity to be morally convincing by the standards of the educated class of the 18th century. With this background we move to Schleiermacher's project and its influence on the Transcendentalists.

Schleiermacher's Project & the Unitarian Great Awakening with a Nod toward Universalism

"I do not speak from any reasoned resolve, nor from hope, nor from fear. Nor is it done from any caprice or accident. Rather, it is the pure necessity of my nature; it is a divine call; it is that which determines my position in the world and makes me what I am. Wherefore if it were neither fitting nor prudent to speak of religion, there is something which compels me and represses with its heavenly power all those small considerations."

--- Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*

What so possessed Schleiermacher? From his Moravian upbringing he valued the sense of piety as something fundamental to the religious life. Yet he struggled with the dogmatic quality of Christianity and all the arguments it engendered. He yearned for a spiritual life set loose from the prevailing rationalism of the 18th century, and open to honest intellectual

examination from any source. He felt called to be a pastor, preacher, teacher and leader of the Protestant Church, and to make it relevant in the lives of people. He wanted integrity of all these things. Thomas Nagel, the American professor known for his work on the philosophy of the mind, might see in Schleiermacher what he described as the "yearning for cosmic reconciliation, that is, for a way of living in harmony with the whole of reality."

I mentioned that one aspect of Schleiermacher's thought that cast him as an early liberal was seeding religion in human nature and experience rather than in supernatural revelation. Now we come to a second marker. Schleiermacher did not believe that Christianity could ignore the claims of the best modern thought. That is, religion is not immune from the progress of knowledge and must be reinterpreted to accommodate the modern world. He was committed to what is true, to what can be known, both in religion and in culture. Therefore, his thinking obligated him toward progress and against outworn forms. Using the famous terminology of Theodore Parker, he endeavored to distinguish the permanent from the transient in religion.

The Enlightenment forces bearing down on Christianity were manifold. Advances in science, especially in understanding the processes of the natural world, undermined supernaturalism. Biblical criticism opened up new understandings of how the scriptures were constructed and cast doubt on their authority as divinely inspired. There began to be a separation between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

The sacred texts of non-Christian religions were becoming available and there was a deeper appreciation for and a curiosity about the wisdom of other cultures. There was a sense of intellectual freedom and discovery in the air that could not be bothered with abstract and convoluted theological arguments, or with staid forms that no longer breathed with life. The birth of modernity was creating a paradigm shift. What possessed Schleiermacher was how religion was being shuffled off to the side and reduced at best to morality. He wanted to authentically reclaim its centrality for modernity.

The irony is that it was the Romantic Movement that inspired Schleiermacher in his rehabilitation of religion while becoming the primary target of his mission as the cultured despisers of religion. His familiarity with the Romanticists of Berlin began with invitations to literary gatherings. When the Wednesday Club was organized he became a member. All the leading lights of the new Romantic schools gravitated there. It was the Berlin version of the Transcendental Club. The literary conversation and free exchange of ideas, the effort to refine the artistic sense and exercise imagination, and the friendships shaped Schleiermacher.

During this period the Romantics provided a fertile soil in which to cultivate major themes of his thought. Among them was the importance of the individual, a high regard for artistic feeling (that was similar to religious feeling) and the power of intuition, and the wonder of the Universe with its storehouse of revelations, active and glorious, containing all. For the

philosopher, this was gourmet intellectual fare while the standard bearers of the old classical school argued over the crumbs of stale bread.

The pastor, however, was disturbed by the abandonment of institutions and in particular the low regard for religion. He shared some of the criticisms but thought that the objections were not about true religion. So he wanted to introduce his literary companions to what they were missing, the central importance of religion and how it gave substance and purpose and meaning for living. He wanted them to see with the same enthusiasm the artistic canvas of religion.

Schleiermacher's project was to articulate a mediating theology between authoritarian confessional orthodoxies and radical Enlightenment thought that lifted reason above religion. The Romantic Movement provided the third way with its emphasis on the exploration of the interior life of the individual. The Romantics were also critical of religion as they understood it, but if they were persuaded to see the light they could participate in the renewal of religion and Protestant Christianity as its most developed expression. So his philosophy aimed to preserve the integrity and irreducibility of religion, to defend its relevance and importance.

Like the Transcendentalists who desired to strip away the husk of religion to have an original experience of what germinated its outer forms, Schleiermacher desired to move past all the varieties of religious expression to religion itself, to its origin, to its spiritual Big Bang or that unmediated point of contact between a person and Life, which is a divine life that belongs to the individual and is also bonded to the unity of all Life, the harmony of the Universe.

The point of contact is interior and begins as a sense of self alienated from its larger source. There is a discontinuity that suggests an Other. The religious feeling is the awareness of absolute dependence upon the Universe. Piety is coming to terms with the source of your being. It encompasses both humility and exaltation. It is the feeling of relationship between the finite and the Infinite. It is living in this awareness.

This was a revolution that earned from some the recognition that Schleiermacher was the founder of liberal religious thought. He rescued Christianity from the cultural forces that weakened its power. He did this by placing Christianity within the larger context of religion redefined and set apart so that religion became the interpreter rather than the interpreted. Debates over the proofs of God, the authority of the Bible, miracles, etc., were no longer important to the definition of religion. Religion at the bedrock is not about knowing or doing. Doctrines, forms and creeds are expressions of religion, secondary to the core of religion which is an experience of the Holy as a living reality. Experience needs no proof. It is its own validity. This trumps any reduction of religion to something else. It also solved the problem of other religions because all develop from a common experience of absolute dependence that issue forth in some form of God-consciousness.

While Schleiermacher refurbished religion and Christianity to accommodate their challenges, that liberal project took a conservative turn. In *The Christian Faith* he took up

traditional Christian doctrines and systematic theology in order to rehabilitate them. Critics on the right and the left were not satisfied. On one side were those who believed that he betrayed his original groundbreaking work by shoehorning it back into the traditional categories of Christian dogma. On the other side the orthodox found some doctrines so reinterpreted that they could not be recognized at all. A case in point is Schleiermacher's universalism.

To begin with, he was hesitant to approach notions about life after death. Anything a person may know is tethered to human experience in this world. Immortality of any kind moves outside of this boundary and thus to entertain notions of life after death is speculation. That is not the field of theology. Indeed, since we cannot know what is outside of actual experience, eschatological themes are thinned out to the point of disappearing.

So he takes the doctrine of "reprobation," the idea that God predestines some people to hell, and creatively reshapes it. One problem with its original definition is that it presents God in a capricious light. To solve this problem he removes reprobation from its metaphysical orbit outside the natural world, and chastens the scope of its meaning.

The argument is that God's concern is for all of humanity and that the redemptive power of the God-consciousness in Jesus was not for select people but would progressively widen to include all people, i.e., humanity. This makes eternal damnation obsolete.

In its recast connotation, reprobation refers to those individuals in this world who have not yet fallen under the redemptive influence of Jesus. There is predestination but it is towards universal salvation or the perfecting of God-consciousness in this world. The life of faith is not about gaining that consciousness during an earthbound temporal journey on the way to an eternal better place. The end of a life of faith is the difference it makes to be under the influence of the Infinite. Salvation is about living a God-conscious life in this world.

Another curious argument he makes against hell is that the blessedness of the redeemed would be compromised by their sympathy for the damned. Even the suffering of the guilty is not enjoyed but pitied. Suffering elicits sympathy, especially when the saved remember how in a time past they were no different from those condemned to misery. Eternal suffering also rubs against the very grain of Holy intention which is to affect its union with humanity, or the restoration of all souls.

Schleiermacher's universalist argument did not gain much traction in Germany, and I do not know if it was a direct influence on the Universalist side of our tradition. What is interesting is that his arguments are not based on scriptural interpretation, but are more philosophical. What he did share with American Universalists was a sense of the aberration of a loving God betraying that divine character by choosing to condemn some people to eternal torment. In Schleiermacher's restructuring of Christian dogma, he modified divine determinism so that it rescued God's character by means of universalism.

Schleiermacher's project shared in spirit the motivations of the Transcendentalist movement. Both were critical of dogmatic religion and formalism. Both sought a source of

religious authority not grounded in supernaturalism, rationalism, or materialism. Both wanted to introduce a sense of vitality to the religious enterprise that escaped the reductive tendency of the modernist impulse. Both hungered for religion that was first hand, for what Emerson called in the Divinity School Address an “original relationship to the Divine.”

Idealism and Romanticism provided the way forward. As a scholar of Plato, a traveler within the Romantic circles of Berlin, and a philosopher with a talent for articulating dialectic thought, Schleiermacher was positioned to make the breakthrough in the understanding of religion that gave an intellectually viable platform for the Unitarian Great Awakening so eagerly yearned for by the leading lights of second generation Unitarianism in New England. That revolution located the authoritative source of religion and Christianity in personal religious experience.

While Schleiermacher was a centralist offering a mediating position between rationalism and supernaturalism in the effort to resurrect religion, the Transcendentalists cast about for any spiritual fresh air that might provide relief from the dry rational intellectualism of the Unitarian establishment. After winning space from orthodox Calvinism, Unitarianism lost its innovative spirit. This felt need for a revitalized spiritual energy bonded the Transcendentalists. It formed the basis of their “like-mindedness” but Transcendentalism itself was a broad term resisted by some of its members, most notably Emerson, and does not represent a structured philosophy or theology in the vein of Schleiermacher. Perhaps the very influence of the Transcendentalists in American culture is in part due to their wrestling with abstract ideas in a language open to wide interpretation.

Transcendentalism was the spirit of a small group of reformers seeking a new expression of liberal religion and intellectual, literary and social thought. This spirit displayed a common tendency toward intuitive philosophical methods, and a romantic approach to the universe. It was optimistic about human nature and the capacity to understand the underlying structure of life. It afforded a sense of participating in an awakening and a protest, especially against the formalism, tradition and conformity embedded in both religion and literature. The religious task was boldly stated by Emerson as he encouraged the graduating seminary students at Harvard to be new-born bards of the Holy Ghost. That same spirit went beyond religion to embrace social morality, civil rights and economics.

The Transcendentalist spirit was inspired by a variety of sources, not the least of which was German Idealism and Romanticism, and in particular Schleiermacher’s work. The essay on *Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists* by Robert D. Richardson, Jr. describes in detail the course of that influence, especially on Emerson. It is interesting to note that Emerson said that Schleiermacher had never been one of his great names. Yet Richardson finds from 1829 on threads of Schleiermacher work running through Emerson’s, and thereafter a suggestive parallel in religious thought. In addition, Schleiermacher’s writings exerted important influence

on Orestes Brownson, George Ripley, Theodore Parker, James Freeman Clarke, and Frederic Henry Hedge.

In the contest with establishment Unitarianism the Transcendentalists called upon Schleiermacher to defend their views. Indeed, the controversy over Emerson's Divinity School Address became an argument over Schleiermacher. Andrews Norton, a noted biblical scholar and professor at Harvard, was a leading proponent of the old school. He objected to the speculation that surrounded higher biblical criticism, and thought that Schleiermacher's influence eroded belief in the personality of God and the historical validation of Christianity. For Norton, the biblical miracles substantiated Christianity while the transcendental "religious sentiment" was too vague to give evidence for the claims of the Christian faith. He considered Emerson anathema persona and Parker riddled with "pantheism," a charged often brought against Schleiermacher.

One must recognize with a bit of irony that the "intuition" of the stuffy Norton was correct. All the forces represented in the American assimilation of Schleiermacher weakened the foundation of Christian Unitarianism anchored in biblical authority. Replacing the witness of historical Christianity grounded in the Bible was the individual who did not need any mediation with the divine. To this day a doctrine of the church remains confused in Unitarian Universalist circles. The religious authority of the individual supersedes institutional structures that provide cohesive identity. Thus there is a constant need for the creative energy that goes into the redefinition of who we are as a people of faith illustrated by the popular coaching of elevator speeches. My own approach to this quandary as many in Prairie Group will recognize, is to focus on the organizing principle of covenant and to shift the primary question from who we are to whose we are. Both counterbalance the excessive weight of individualism and lift up the relational quality of our theology.

It was George Ripley who took up a rigorous defense of Emerson against Norton. The 419 printed pages of rebuttal included an extensive presentation of Schleiermacher that was the most comprehensive review of his religious thought in English in the first half of the nineteenth century. While Ripley labored to correct the image of Schleiermacher as an "infidel" in the polarizing language of Norton, the contest over the province of religious authority only sharpened. We now know the outcome of that contest. The new school figures like Emerson, Ripley and Parker effectively carried Schleiermacher into the American religious liberal context. Norton belonged to the past and the Transcendentalists to the future.

Religious authority and authenticity shifted from outward forms to the interior life of a person. Any idea, principle or conception that does not come from reflection upon an individual's own feeling is adopted or secondhand. Knowledge about religion is not the religious life. (Woe to Unitarian Universalists.) For Parker, the "religious element" is natural to all people. From it springs religion, and in the Christian context the only eternal element is the Word of God or truth received through experience. The Word inspires moral courage in the

direction of protecting and nurturing human dignity. So Parker was involved in social reform movements not to prove his goodness but as a call of faith in response to the Word.

Likewise, Emerson located religious authority in the individual. It flowed through a person as moral sentiment and as noble instincts in congruence with the immanent divine power that inhabited people and nature. The religious life was cultivating this connection. That union gives instruction for ethical action. Spiritual truth becomes moral ideal that leads to Walden Pond and Brook Farm. In essence the Moral Law is progressive, always moving forward to political, social, religious and educational reform. Since that Law is universal and available to all, human beings are equal and related. The purpose of community is for the communication of inspiration as it is individually experienced and reflected upon, and for the opportunities for growth provided in communal experience not available in isolation.

Of course, the problem inherent in all idealism is that Plato needs Aristotle to be grounded in the realities of the human condition which are complex and often ambiguous. Pragmatism sobers romanticism. To explain the hobgoblin of my mind, all you need to know is that basically I am an idealist who trusts Aristotle more than Plato. To explain similar tensions within Unitarian Universalism today, all one needs to understand is that we are the inheritor of both the Enlightenment and its critic, the Romantic Movement through Transcendentalism. Here we stand, or perhaps it is more descriptive to say here we wobble.

Finally, the influence of Schleiermacher also inhabits the notions of freedom and diversity in Transcendentalist thought. Schleiermacher understood that the project of the Universe was to find its place in the particular heart of each person, and that it took the individual expression of the Universe working through a person to give the full picture of the Unity of all things. Each contributed his or her part to the mosaic. One should expect, therefore, difference in the articulation of beliefs. What is important is the freedom of expressing the truth as one receives it, and through that expression in community enabled to test it and refine it.

Diversity is not a threat in his thought because it expresses the working out of the will of the Universe which is always toward a dialectical harmony. The person includes the Universe, and through a person the Universe is “capable of an endless number of characteristic manifestations.” (*On Religion*, p. 51) The Universe communicates itself through the multitude, and the multitude communicates the unity of All. “In life, the necessary element is taken up, taken up into freedom.” (*ibid*, p. 51)

The purpose of “religion does not, even once, desire to bring those who believe and feel to one belief and one feeling. Its endeavor is to open in those who are not yet capable of religious emotions, the sense for the unity of the original source of life.” Each person “is a new priest, a new mediator, a new organ” of the Infinite. (*ibid*, p. 55) “Religion is the natural and sworn foe of all narrow-mindedness, and of all onesidedness.” (*ibid*, p. 56) For Schleiermacher, religion and humanity are part and parcel of each other. The “most holy” religious feeling is

found in the consciousness of “existence in the whole of humanity.” (ibid, p. 72) The humanity in each individual is a revelation of “undivided humanity.”

The Church is better built around union than uniformity. (Perhaps this is another helpful insight for Unitarian Universalism today.) Teachers and preachers need the freedom of belief and action for the Universal power to affect its end. So Schleiermacher was a strong supporter of the separation of church and state, resisted placing too much power in hierarchal forms, and argued that truth and freedom formed the basis of Protestant worship.

James Freeman Clarke, in a letter to Emerson in 1835, caught the significance of Schleiermacher for Transcendentalism when he wrote that the German theologian was the defender of the “intellectual dignity” of “the religious principle.” With Schleiermacher in hand, religious experience upended the arguments over dogma, doctrine, and miracles. Here was a pious man who intellectually grounded the importance of the individual, the imperative of freedom, the value of diversity, and the call to reform in a religious context. In a way, and with apology to Emerson, the Transcendentalists hitched their wagon to his star.

The early and liberal Schleiermacher, along with the European romantic and idealistic revival, opened a door through which the Transcendentalists transported themselves from a closed house to an open field. Schleiermacher’s philosophical theology was the vehicle the Transcendentalists crowded into and at the border of institutional Unitarianism presented a legitimate passport for passing to the other side. Once there, there was no conservative turn back. The opportunities for exploration scattered the passengers and in the Unitarian Great Awakening there was a diminished focus on preserving and strengthening Unitarianism as a religion.

Schleiermacher’s project concluded in taking the Universal and bending it back somewhat awkwardly into its ultimate particularity which was Christianity, and more specifically Protestant Christianity. While for the new light Unitarians the universal principle grounded in the individual diffused Unitarianism. We still struggle to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Indeed, for many that is altogether a dead project, like apologizing for an anthropomorphic God. While I do not share Schleiermacher’s Christian triumphalism, my interest follows somewhat in his direction. That is, articulating a broad institutional and spiritual continuity between our liberal tradition and new interpretation, and binding the contemporary Unitarian Universalist faith journey to a larger religious context from which it both draws and contributes.

The Life of the Spirit

“With all your science can you tell how it is, and
whence it is, that light comes into the soul?”

-- Henry David Thoreau

What the new brain science tells us is that the mind is so constituted that it is compelled to find a story, to weave together facts and experience and imagination into a narrative. In the religious sphere narratives are created to impart a sense of place, of being located, of participating somehow in a purpose that moves beyond the self. The mind does not easily tolerate loose ends, especially when that loose end is one's self. The mind strives to fill the gap, to connect parts together, to collect moments into a travelogue that gives birth to a plot and a role for the person.

To be human is to fashion and tell stories against the dark, against limitless time and space, against our transience, against the terror of nothing, against our ultimate dependence. Religious stories order our lives by expressing something about who we are and what we are meant to be. They give moral direction and frame right relationship. A story by its very nature constructs a space where one belongs and is connected to others.

Being human we desire a context where our little story finds itself integrated into a larger story. One interpretation of the power of extremism today is that for the lack of finding a meaningful place in the disjointed structure of modern society, the isolated and deconstructed person is drawn to a vision that makes him or her a valuable agent even unto death of a plan to remold the world of the Many into the forced cohesion of the One.

Now the story I tell about our faith concerns *the life of the spirit*. This phrase has resonance with our Hebrew, Christian and Protestant roots, with the religious thought of Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists, and can be translated into other traditions.

It has resonance in my life because I encountered the capital version of the spirit as a young man. That religious experience is accurately described by Schleiermacher. It was both humbling and exalting. It was a conversion experience toward what Schleiermacher would call God-consciousness. So it is that I know and believe in the power of transformative experiences in the lives of people.

A power other than my own washed over me, a power some would call the Holy Spirit and I do not resist that naming for it matters not what it is called. Its reality as a lived experience is so complete that I still live off it today and do not feel the need to seek it again. That power brought me to my knees, poured humility into my soul as one ultimately dependent, and yet lifted me to the holy place on the mountain where burning bushes live and you are burned with a glory beyond the self that touches you and leaves its mark forever. I could see the spinning Universe and it was overwhelming except for the fact that it also existed in me. I was called to consciousness and it required a response.

I dedicated my life to the ministry and acquired the title "Reverend" though I do not bear that designation because I am innocent, or because I have never known trouble or doubt, or because I have never failed or chosen wrongly, or because I am invulnerable to temptation. The title is not a sign of a perfecting character. It is a sign of commitment. That commitment is

not to a professional career, but to the professing of a way of life called the life of the spirit. It is a way of life with people and the Holy which dwells within us and among us and apart from us, which makes me something of a small “t” trinitarian in Unitarian guise. It seems that I am capable of all kinds of heresy under the promptings of the spirit. Emerson, at least, would approve.

The spirit is not separate from our anthropology. We are of the earth, made of dust and water. We are creatures of clay and star stuff, born of the earth and destined to return to it. But here is the miracle and the mystery: we are more than body for there is a spirit. We are mind and body, and the clay and consciousness and spirit are part of each other. The body gives expression to the spirit, and the spirit is the glory and the fulfillment of our psychophysical being.

And the wonder is this: how did we come to have body that is spirit? In Genesis the poet/priest/story teller speaks of God breathing into the clay, melding spirit and body. The anthropologist Loren Eiseley tells another story.

He points to how forty thousand years ago in the bleak uplands of southwestern Asia, a man, a Neanderthal man—a man whose face might cause you some uneasiness if he sat beside you and whose genes flow through *Homo sapiens*—such a man existed with a fearful body handicap in that ice-age world. He had lost an arm. But still he lived and was cared for. Somebody or some group of people in the tree of our evolution loved this maimed creature enough to cherish him.

Eiseley writes that looking across the centuries at our ancient ancestors one can see a faint light, like a patch of sunlight moving over the dark shadows on a forest floor. It shifts and widens and even winks out, but comes again and persists. It can be put to death on a cross but rises again. It is the spirit evolving, coming to life within the body and mind. It is the human spirit, however transient, however faulty people claim it to be. And it is this inner light that finally defines our humanity, which engenders courage and gentleness, some freedom beyond instinct, beyond flight or fight and toward love.

Take the story you want. Both speak the same truth, that what we are without that light, the spirit, is something less than human. Our redemption from partiality, self-centeredness, and the sin of unconsciousness, is the quality of the spirit.

That spirit is not a thing. You cannot locate it with an X-ray. You cannot discover it with an autopsy. It is not an organ. Yet it is natural to us, not supernatural. The spirit came to us through our evolution, and perhaps it is the universe becoming aware of itself or perhaps it is the Universe calling us to be awake. For the spirit is our capacity for appreciative awareness.

The spirit functions as the discernment for what is good and just and beautiful and loving. It is the light that comes into the soul. The spirit calls us out from ourselves to be in right relationship with others. The spirit is the highway that connects hearts, which makes

compassion possible, and gives us the capability for covenant making. It is the spirit of a people bound in covenant that creates our church.

And the remarkable thing about the spirit is that it knows no color, and will not be defined by gender or sexual orientation or tribe or political party or any of the ways we separate ourselves from each other. The purpose of the church is building a loving community with a theology and story to allow that quality of the spirit to flourish.

Our church serves the life of the spirit. It is greater than the sum of its parts. We nurture and grow that spirit, and protect it from everything that would diminish it. And the role of its clergy is to help people become aware of and sensitive to the spirit, to testify to its power in his or her own life, and to help discern the call of the spirit for the congregation in its context.

Thus do I bear witness to the life of the spirit, how it has blessed me and called me to be and to do what is beyond my self alone. Thus I bear witness to the resulting conviction rooted in religious experience that we have each in our own way been called to be stewards of the spirit, our most precious gift, in this tradition we are committed to serve. It is a life worth living, and worthy of our best endeavors. So may it be. Amen & Amen & Amen.

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