

# More Than A Feeling

Prairie Group – November, 2014

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Word Count: 5,367

*Assignment: **Once More With Feeling.** How and if does Schleiermacher's theory matter for our own spiritual practice and ministry? In our efforts (and should we make such efforts?) to bring a sense of feeling and awe into our worship, small groups, teaching -- and our own spiritual practice as ministers -- is Schleiermacher helpful to us now? How so? Respondent: The Rev. Bret Lortie*

*I looked out this morning and the sun was gone  
Turned on some music to start my day  
I lost myself in a familiar song  
I closed my eyes and I slipped away  
It's more than a feeling, when I hear that old song they used to play  
I begin dreaming<sup>1</sup>*

Similar to this reflective expression of *Boston's* music, Schleiermacher believes the truest experience of religion is related to, but more than, feeling. He writes, "The ultimate reality is the identity of the Spirit and...the identity can be felt."<sup>2</sup> As earlier papers surely have thoroughly explored, Schleiermacher's understanding of religion leads beyond a focus on reason and intellect alone to the importance of human feeling and emotion, to a deeper sense of humanity. He writes, "Intuition without feeling is nothing and can have neither the proper origin nor the proper force; feeling without intuition is also nothing, both are therefore something only when and because they are originally one and unseparated."<sup>3</sup> Expanding the religious life, like a pendulum returning from its harsh swing into absolutist and rigid rationalism, Schleiermacher, among others, calls back the ancient wisdom of intuition, wonder, awe, beauty, and a sense dependence on the universe itself, moving toward an essential, sacred balance.

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<sup>1</sup> Lyrical excerpt from the song "More Than A Feeling" by Boston.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Copleston, "Schleiermacher" in *A History of Philosophy, volume 7: Modern Philosophy*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 151.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Schleiermacher, *Schliermacher: On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 31.

It was the mystic Rumi who said, “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.”<sup>4</sup> Beyond words, there is experience. This is a move toward holism that has too often been discarded since the Enlightenment. We have been caught in a dichotomy of either head *or* heart, of reason and intellect *or* fanatical belief and superstition. Schleiermacher’s greatest potential gift to liberal religion in a post-modern and pluralistic age is the holistic integration of human experience to create a sustaining, perhaps salvific, spiritual life. Rooted in a commitment to a reasonable religious perspective with an embrace of intuition and trans-rational experience, Schleiermacher’s theory of religious practice continues to offer a pertinent, and prophetic, way to be religious.

The short answer to my charge is this: Amen and Alleluia! Yes, it is this writer’s rational thought, belief, feeling and intuition that Schleiermacher provides a way for us to be religious that does not ask us to check our head at the door, or our heart.

### ***Let’s get together and feel all right***

With the expanse of technological advancement, especially social media, the ways by which we communicate are rapidly changing. It might be fitting to re-interpret Thoreau to say “our lives are twittered away by detail.” We live in an age of constant communication, connection, and coupled with it: isolation and loneliness. As a millennial, I am native to the language and use of technology, finding it to provide a wealth of easily accessible information, regular small-dose connection with friends, family, and colleagues, and a wider world full of possibility and resources of collective wisdom. Yet, perhaps as a luddite, I am increasingly aware of the fracturing of communities because of our perceived sense of connection that, while constant, can remain shallow. It is the shallowing of relationship and community, the receding of life-sustaining waters, that makes me adamant for the necessity of in-person community. While the modern age currently leads toward a *beyond congregations* discussion, I just wonder, companioned with neuroscience and sociology, that traditional congregational life might be just retro enough to be cool again. That being said, there are ways in which

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<sup>4</sup> Coleman Barks, *Essential Rumi* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 35.

congregational life clearly needs to be recalibrated, but I believe recalibration and re-visioning is part of our charge, rather than simply replacement.

Several studies in recent years have pointed to the community damage that is possible with our exponentially growing technological communication practices. One recent study, from the University of Michigan, points out:

“The human need for social connection is well established, as are the benefits that people derive from such connections. On the surface, Facebook provides an invaluable resource for fulfilling such needs by allowing people to instantly connect. Rather than enhancing well-being, as frequent interactions with supportive “offline” social networks powerfully do, the current findings demonstrate that interacting with Facebook may predict the opposite result for young adults—it may undermine it...a number of recent studies indicate that people's *perceptions* of social isolation (i.e., how lonely they feel)—a variable that we assessed in this study, which did not influence our results—are a more powerful determinant of well-being than *objective* social isolation.”<sup>5</sup>

The study takes the reality of social media to a reflective realm in terms of perception. By scrolling through one’s facebook page, twitter feed, or other social media, one may gain the perception of loneliness, as in “hey, I’m not doing as much fun stuff as they are, or I’m not with them, or I wish I was writing about Schleiermacher, or my life circumstances aren’t so perfect”, etc. Too often, one’s solitary time is used to troll the volumes upon volumes of the social media library, consuming way too much input, ultimately not tending to one’s own soul, spirit, well-being, and increasing their sense of loneliness through a process of passive observation of the lives of others.

There are clear and substantial benefits to technological communication and social media connection, especially as it relates to connection across large distances or even to connect with an online religious community such as our own Church of the Larger Fellowship, our largest congregation. However, it seems increasingly important in my own ministry and life to see technological communication as a supplement, not a replacement, for building and sustaining significant relationships. (As a caveat, if I ever post on Facebook about Schleiermacher, I expect you all to “like” it, but please, for Schleiermacher’s sake, add an emoticon to be in touch with your feelings.)

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<sup>5</sup> Ethan Kross, *Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in Young Adults*, found at <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0069841>, accessed September, 2014.

The role of local congregations in response to this reality is clear, and Schleiermacher's work seems surprisingly timely to our modern technological era, within a wider framework of feeling as it relates to religious community. Church is a counter-cultural, radical idea – as it has been in various ways throughout history – by providing a physical place for the experience of embodied community.

***Come, Come, whoever you are***

Within the wider cultural call for an embodiment of communal living, Unitarian Universalism in particular seems to have a helpful nuance and narrative of pluralism that leads toward growing communities in a changing world. However, it seems that a dramatic shift and deep reflection in our approach to this is needed, as in the past our tradition has tended toward a view similar to sociologists in the 1970s and 1980s: that as science, reason, and enlightenment thinking became more and more commonplace, religion would lessen, as its' tenets of belief would become increasingly less plausible. That was not the case. Religion functioned in a different way than assumed, by not offering answers, per say, but rather by offering a shared communal life, a shared identity, and a common place for nourishment and sustenance in an increasingly complex world. Likewise, our movement has tended toward an arrogant view of supercessionism, as in, "eventually everyone will come around to believe like we do, as they become more educated and aware of the history of religions and the wisdom of many traditions. Just give them time." I believe arrogance is not the best marketing strategy.

Rather, a perspective rooted not in factual information or reason alone, but a holistic approach to the totality of what it means to be human, can speak to a wider population, and can bring a saving message to more communities. Schleiermacher's definition of religion is helpful here: "For the essence of religion is 'neither thought nor action but intuition and feeling. It seeks to intuit the Universe...religion is for [Schleiermacher] essentially or fundamentally the feeling of dependence on the infinite.'"<sup>6</sup> This experience of the universe, rooted in dependence and feeling, is deeply pluralistic for Schliermacher, which highlights the central importance of a salvific pluralistic message in the modern world: "[Schleiermacher] insists that God transcends all human

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<sup>6</sup> Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 152.

categories...at the same time God is not to be conceived as static Substance but as infinite Life which reveals itself necessarily in the world...Schleiermacher opposes any view of God which amounts to “bringing the Supreme Being within the sphere of limitation.”<sup>7</sup>

Schleiermacher believed that experience and intuition were primary forces in revealing to the individual, along with relationship in the wider community, the truth of life. His approach lifts up the pluralistic prophetic perspective: God, the holy, or wisdom, speaks from many sources; it cannot be bound. Thus, experience has the ability, and perhaps obligation, to influence and change interpretations of scripture and tradition. In this way, the ability of the individual to interact with and change text, thus opening up the possibility of theological diversity, was more possible: “All doctrines and all teachings of Scripture became revisable in the light of human God-consciousness. What Schleiermacher accomplished was to separate religion (including Christianity) from the realm of “facts” discoverable by science and philosophy. He rescued religion and Christianity from the acids of modernity by reducing them and restricting them to an entirely different realm.”<sup>8</sup>

Rooted in feeling and intuition, Schleiermacher’s approach to religious life naturally leads toward a sense of reverence. This promotes pluralism as it is not based on creedal or dogmatic rigidity, but on an opening of the heart. As author Paul Woodruff writes, “Reverence is a matter of feeling, and as far as feelings go, it doesn’t much matter what you believe. Reverence can occur in ancient polytheism as well as in modern Christianity or Islam, so reverence makes few demands on belief. Otherwise it would not be consistent with so many different creeds.”<sup>9</sup>

A religious communal life that is not based primarily or centrally on cognitive ability opens the door to a wider welcome of a diverse human community. Schleiermacher poignantly remarked, “...do not relegate me without a hearing to those whom you look down upon as common and uncultivated as if the sense for the holy, like an old folk-

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<sup>7</sup> Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 155.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Olson, *What is Theological Liberalism?*, found at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerolson/2011/07/what-is-theological-liberalism/>, accessed September, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117.

costume, had passed over to the lower class of people to whom alone it is still seemly to be gripped by awe and belief in the unseen.”<sup>10</sup> Here, he lifts up the important relationship of religion, culture, tradition, cognition, and class, calling for a religious perspective that, while resonant with intellectual rigor and integrity, is still approachable for those whose primary way of intuiting the world is feeling and emotion. He also reprimands the reader to lift up that awe and wonder are not uncivilized or uneducated experiences, but part of a larger whole that is a deeply integrated experience of being human.

Schleiermacher is rooted in a sense of religion that calls on the heart and the experience of the religious life. In that way, churches are called to move beyond facts and intellect *alone*, keeping the door to truth open. Embracing principles to search “everywhere and anywhere” for the ground of being, and that “revelation is not sealed,” he calls for religion to move into a realm of embodiment and experience, flinging wide the door to a religious way of life that speaks to the fullness of human experience. As one author reminds us, “Schleiermacher is less concerned to tell us “what to believe” than he is with showing “what it is to believe” by showing how religious life arises from the self’s relationship to the universe.”<sup>11</sup>

### ***Wake, Now, My Senses***

Gathering together in shared space, which is an ancient ritual and core experience to human community, has become radical in the modern world. We gather with deep intention, with various levels of formality, in a culture that is less and less formal in its ways to gather, to breathe and listen and share and pray and sing and join in story, song, art, and beauty. We gather as an embodiment of our living history, and as a place of transformation – of the soul, and of society. Public worship is how we express our narrative, proclaim our hopes for our world, nourish the soul, and call our people into the experience of living transformation. As our good colleagues in this circle write,

“Intentional churchgoing involves seeing worship as the primary spiritual practice that informs everything else a person does in the church. Intentional churchgoers believe that participating in church life has the power to transform their lives toward greater depth, joy, and meaning. Intentional church life engage members in a community that sees itself as more than a civic institution or club or school;

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<sup>10</sup> *Schliermacher: On Religion*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, xxix.

that sees itself as a continuing embodiment of a religious way of life and tradition. That way of life is revealed in stories, images, music, and metaphors that speak of ethical imperatives and incarnated truths. It is revealed in worship.”<sup>12</sup>

By gathering together in Worship, in physical space and proximity, we engage an embodied way of being religious that seems to have a deeper resonance with the soul than experiences that are outside of generally close physical proximity. This sense, or feeling of shared Worship, at least in part, relates to the neuro-scientific understanding of *limbic resonance*.

“Limbic Resonance [is] a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby minds become attuned to each other’s inner states... limbic resonance is the door to communal connection. Limbic resonance supplies the wordless harmony we see everywhere but take for granted... This silent reverberation between minds is so much a part of us that... it functions smoothly and continuously without our notice... Feelings are contagious, while notions are not;... limbic activity of those around us draws our emotions into almost immediate congruence... That’s why the movie viewed in a theater of thrilled fans is electrifying, when its living room version disappoints... it’s the crowd that releases storytelling magic, the essential, communal, multiplied wonder.”<sup>13</sup>

The power of Worship is the ability to create *multiplied wonder* within a framework of sharing and living a shared narrative and common values. Beyond being “like-minded”, which often relates primarily to political perspective, and deeper than our joint action in the world, is our experience of wonder and beauty in a shared experience of worship.

Without attempting to pursue an exhaustive approach to liturgical theory and practice here, it seems important to lift up a few areas in which Schleiermacher’s understanding of religious life comes alive in communal worship. His focus on intuition, feeling, awe and wonder lend toward a holistic and integrated approach to common worship, rooted in varied mediums, voices, perspectives and art forms. “Schleiermacher believed that his deadened feelings were re-enlivened through music... The internal result of the impress of sensations is an affect, a moment of sensible self-consciousness. Music, according to Schleiermacher, is thus quite literally, affect attunement. This

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<sup>12</sup> Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, *Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, & Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 63.

transformation of physical impulses (sound) into rhythmic feeling (music) is a nonconceptual activity of human consciousness.”<sup>14</sup>

By engaging the arts in worship, or more rightly, by being aware and intentional about *how* the arts are integrated in worship, the shared experience is deepened. This is a twofold challenge: to regularly engage the arts in a broad approach, inviting visual, musical, tactile and physical embodiment into the worship service, as well as simply being mindful of the many ways that aesthetics are already part of one’s worship service, and being sure to use them with intention and purpose. Some of our churches do this consistently; others, not so much. And a large number of our congregations likely fall in between, due to various circumstances related to congregational size, staffing, and worship leadership.

Regardless of circumstance, however, if we are to apply Schleiermacher’s understanding of experience and feeling into our worship, it is essential to engage various approaches to truth and meaning, to beauty and awe, through written and spoken word, and beyond words: in visual, audio, and tactile arts.

With this holistic approach, it is important for each component to sync together, to create an arch of the common worship experience to enable, enhance, and embolden the possibility for awe, wonder, and beauty. Preachers, don’t be fooled: centrally important is how we approach our sermons as an art form, recalling Emerson’s call to be “newborn Bards of the Holy Ghost” – to be poets of the holy. Preachers are called to be artists: both homiletic and liturgical, to engage the artistry of our sermons as well as hold the vision, collaboratively with other worship staff and lay leaders, of the flow, energy, and emotional landscape of the service. As Thandeka reminds us, “Schleiermacher composed his sermons as acts of imagination. They are vivid displays of concrete, affective thinking.”<sup>15</sup> Each aspect of Worship – from invocation to benediction, or from announcements to coffee hour, calls forth the possibility for transformation and multiplied wonder. Very practically, “...you can invite musicians, poets, and dancers who can help you create Sunday services that will have emotional intelligence as well as

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<sup>14</sup> Thandeka, in Marina, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Schleiermacher*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 289.

<sup>15</sup> Thandeka, in *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Schleiermacher*, 296.

intellectual integrity.”<sup>16</sup> Schleiermacher believed in the power of shared worship influenced and formatted around feelings and emotion, around a feeling of dependence on the universe, and balancing the life of the head and the heart. The role of the preacher in this framework becomes speaking the truth in love by creating a space where a relationship with the universe is more possible:

“But we know very well that our words are only shadows of our intuitions and feelings, and without sharing these with us they would not understand that they say and what they believe they think. We cannot teach them to intuit...Perhaps we can arouse the mimetic talent of their imagination to the extent that it becomes easy for them, when intuitions of religions are painted for them in bold colors, to produce in themselves some stirrings that remotely resemble those they see filling our souls.”<sup>17</sup>

And yet, beyond our words, regardless of how intentional, other practices perhaps should become more and more central to our worship life. One tradition that understands this approach, and Schleiermacher’s emphasis on intuition and feeling beyond intellect, reason, and cognitive ability, is Quakerism, or the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers, as many know, use silence as the centering common practice to guide their communal spiritual lives. As Quaker Rufus Jones expressed: “Silence itself, of course, has no magic. It may be just sheer emptiness, absence of words or noise or music. It may be an occasion for slumber, or it may be a dead form. But it may be an intensified pause, a vitalized hush, a creative quiet, an actual moment of meeting with God or the Holy with what we can do with our human life here on earth.”<sup>18</sup> For Schleiermacher’s approach, Worship beyond words provides a gateway out of the rigidity of intellectual absolutism, or the pre-condition of a certain level of cognitive ability to participate in the community. Instead, the practice of silence places importance on the shared experience and feeling of the community, with a naturally pluralistic approach.

There is a particular experience described in Quaker circles as a “covered meeting” or a “gathered meeting”, wherein the Spirit is felt by the community to be particularly, or potently present. One Quaker writes,

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<sup>16</sup> Thandeka, *Future Designs for American Liberal Theology*, found at <http://www.uurockford.org/prairie-group-2014-readings.htm>, accessed September, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Schleiermacher: *On Religion*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Whitmire, *Plain Living*, (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2001), 123.

“In the practice of group worship on the basis of silence come special times when the electric hush and solemnity and depth of power steals over the worshipers. A blanket of divine covering comes over the room, a stillness that can be felt is over all, and the worshipers are gathered into a unity and synthesis of life, which is amazing indeed. A quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and blending our spirits within a superindividual Life and Power. An objective, dynamic Presence enfolds us all, nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort within us, and quickens us in depths that had before been slumbering. The Burning Bush has been kindled in our midst, and we stand together on holy ground.”<sup>19</sup>

For this Quaker, the *dynamic Presence* is shared over the Worship meeting, and is rooted not in ideas or rational thinking, per say, but the experience of a formative, even transformative, shared energy. To keep the practice of silence away from isolated individualism, Quaker theologian Wilmer Cooper writes, “...Friends need to be vigilant in nurturing the life of the Spirit in their own lives in order to enrich their periods of gathered worship.”<sup>20</sup> This leads us to the central importance of spiritual practice as it relates to the health and well-being of the religious communal life. This is expressed in some ways in outward and inward religion – the communal and the individual life: “...and thus the organization of the communicative expressions of piety in a community is usually called *Outward Religion*, while the total content of the religious emotions, as they actually occur in individuals, is called *Inward Religion*.”<sup>21</sup>

### ***Spiritual Texting & Testifying***

One of Schleiermacher’s potential gifts to individual liberal religious spiritual practice is the centrality of personal intuition and the call for dependence. This is a radical call within a tradition that is rooted in the progress of humanity, the constant betterment of society, and the forward movement of people with the ability to be successful in such an endeavor. Schleiermacher importantly emphasizes a central element and call for religious leaders toward humility, rooted in his understanding of dependence on the universe, and relationship with the infinite. “At any given moment in

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Kelly in *Practicing Peace: a devotional walk through the Quaker tradition*, (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2007), 48.

<sup>20</sup> Wilmer Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical and Comparative Study of Quaker Beliefs*, (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1990), 98.

<sup>21</sup> Frederich Schleiermacher: *The Christian Faith*, (Berkeley: The Apocryphile Press), 30.

which a human being is thinking or doing anything whatsoever, that moment will be characterized partially by freedom and partially by dependence. No moment within the horizon of life can be wholly and completely active without a single element of receptivity present as well.”<sup>22</sup>

Spiritual practice reminds us of this balance of freedom and dependency, calling us inward for nourishment and reflection, centering and grounding. It also calls us outward, moving our heart and soul in ways that bring our most closely held values and beliefs about what is sacred into the world through acts of justice and compassion. There is a deep feeling for Schleiermacher in an experience of the universe, and one’s feeling of dependence on it, as he writes,

“When the world spirit has majestically revealed itself to us, when we have overheard its action guided by much magnificently conceived and excellent laws, what is more natural than to be permeated by a heartfelt reverence in the face of the eternal and invisible? And when we have intuited the universe and, looking back from that perspective upon our self, see how, in comparison with the universe, it disappears into infinite smallness, what can then be more appropriate for mortals than true unaffected humility? When we also perceive our fellow creatures in the intuition of the world and it is clear to us how each of them without distinction is his own representation of humanity just as we are... what is more natural than to embrace them all with heartfelt love and affection...?”<sup>23</sup>

Here Schleiermacher lays out a funnel-down spirituality, beginning with our relation with the universe, being raptured in reverence at the eternal, and then intuiting the grandeur of the universe to move us toward humility, and in so doing, realize our relationship as equals and our kinship with all of humanity, and perhaps, all of creation. In this approach, Schleiermacher lifts up a potentially helpful formula for a pluralistic tradition to engage in religious communal life. He states, “...one intuits the universe only through others, and that one intuits others only through love.”<sup>24</sup>

Thus, spiritual practice calls the individual to an intentional religious life, which calls one toward both inner reflection, lending toward humility and awe, ultimately moving outward to create relationship. It first reminds one that we are not God, or the

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<sup>22</sup> Christine Helmer, ed., *Schleiermacher and Whitehead: Open Systems in Dialogue*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter), 107.

<sup>23</sup> Schleiermacher: *On Religion*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Beiser in *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Schleiermacher*, 62.

Ultimate Truth, or the totality of the universe in ourselves. In this way, Schleiermacher calls us toward reverence. As Paul Woodruff writes,

Reverence must stand in awe of something – something I will call the object of reverence. What could it be? Something that reminds us of human limitations...Therefore you must believe that there is one Something that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: it cannot be changed or controlled by human means, is not fully understood by human experts, was not created by human beings, and is transcendent.”<sup>25</sup>

Schleiermacher’s understanding of intuition and awe are rooted in humility and relationship. He writes, “The religious self-consciousness, like every essential element in human nature, leads necessarily in its development to fellowship or communion; a communion which, on the one hand, is variable and fluid, and, on the other hand, has definite limits.” Whatever is found in one’s own spiritual practice is invited to be shared in community. This is not only beneficial to the communal conversation and practice, but a central part of the individual’s practice to provide testimony and speak their faith. This is a critical part of being a pluralistic community. Rather than a process of theological minimization, which reduces our narrative to the lowest common denominator, religious self-consciousness can lift up and celebrate our religious diversity, so that various beliefs and perspectives are not only welcome, but appreciated for the gifts they can bring to each other’s own spiritual development. As Robert Richardson reminds us, “...perhaps the strongest parallel between Schleiermacher and Emerson is their common emphasis on the fundamental need to communicate one’s religious feelings to other human beings.”<sup>26</sup>

One approach that Schleiermacher lifts up for spiritual practice is a form of literacy knowledge. Schleiermacher speaks, in an early-formulated way, of a transactional theory of literacy. “[Schleiermacher] is currently best known as the founder of modern hermeneutics, the first to pay attention to the phenomenology of reading, the first to recognize the claims of the reader as well as the writer of any given text.”<sup>27</sup> Expounded on in some ways by John Dewey, this approach in literacy educational philosophy and pedagogy was formalized by Louise Rosenblatt in the mid 1970s/1980s.

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<sup>25</sup> *Reverence*, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Richardson, *Schleiermacher and Transcendentalism*, found at <http://www.urockford.org/prairie-group-2014-readings.htm>, 136.

<sup>27</sup> *Schleiermacher and Transcendentalism*, 122.

This literacy approach, in many ways, relates to the traditional practice of “Lectio Divina” in that it is about interaction and a relationship between the reader and the text. One educator explains it in this way,

“Transactional theory, as it applies to literary criticism and the teaching of literature, suggests a "reciprocal, mutually defining relationship" (Rosenblatt, 1986) between the reader and the literary text... Transactional theory proposes that the relationship between reader and text is much like that between the river and its banks, each working its effects upon the other, each contributing to the shape of the poem.”<sup>28</sup>

This educational philosophy has roots in the work of Schleiermacher, and provides an approach for deeper spiritual practice. In place of simply reading a text to glean inspiration or wisdom, the reader becomes interactive with the text, and the practice of reading becomes more embodied, moving from intellect to intuition, from head to heart. By interacting with the text, and letting the energy of inspiration ebb and flow between text and reader, the text jumps off the page and enters into the life experience of the reader, each informing and being formed by the other. This is also rooted in Schleiermacher’s larger framework of a holistic understanding of human experience. In this way, a transactional approach to spiritual practice takes into consideration the social location of both text and reader, promoting a creative interchange between the wisdom and inspiration of text and the person. In essence, it creates the potential for a text to transform, perhaps even in the midst of spiritual practice, from prose, poetry or facts, into sacred scripture. Here, Schleiermacher calls for intuition, awe, and wonder to guide our own spiritual practice, rooted in humility on one’s dependence on the universe and called to bear witness to one’s belief in the community. This boils down to this: Creation is sacred, you are sacred, your neighbor is sacred. And when you share this experience of the sacred dimension of life with others in community, hearts are opened and lives transformed.

### ***Feels like heaven***

In an age of increased isolation from the idolatry of social media communication replacing physical proximity interaction, church is needed in our world as much as ever.

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<sup>28</sup> R. Probst, *Transactional Theory in the Teaching of Literature*, <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-926/theory.htm> accessed September, 2014.

And church can be engaged in a practice of embodied spiritual experience, experienced and understood through neuroscience, but rooted in raw experience of the community. It can be a community bound in shared experience, with an integrated sense of both intellect and intuition, seeking wisdom from many sources, through which the thread of truth weaves with a pluralistic approach.

This can be nurtured and encouraged through various mediums: primarily the arts in worship, creative interchange in spiritual practice, and communal testimony and witness. Should we engage Schleiermacher's theory in our personal and communal religious and congregational life? Yes. Of course.

As Thandeka reminds us,

“But you are not being adequately trained to create religious services that change and heal congregants' hearts through liturgical practices that uplifts emotions, the experiences of which are then affirmed and expanded upon homiletically. Congregants thus lack the firsthand experience in Sunday services of standing strong and steadfast on the side of love. Our ministers are trained to think about religion rather than also to practice it affectively through the ways in which they structure their Sunday services. Congregants, just like their minister, focus on ideas.”<sup>29</sup>

Instead of moving beyond the idea of congregations, our congregations should move beyond the realm of ideas alone, facts alone, reason alone. Nor should we move to faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone. There is a middle way of balance. In a simple formulation, to boil it all down to the practical and pragmatic for parish ministry, this middle way seems to emphasize these things: (1) engage the arts in worship, (2) embrace silence in communal and individual spiritual practice, (3) use technology as a supplement to relationship, not a replacement, (4) encourage deep listening and testimony in our congregations, (5) embrace pluralism and expansive language<sup>30</sup> as a gift rather than emphasizing reason and intellect as a corrective and reaction to other religious traditions, and (6) don't be afraid of feelings.

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<sup>29</sup> Thandeka, *Future Designs for American Liberal Theology*.

<sup>30</sup> I use the term “expansive language” to refer to embracing varying spiritual perspectives within the same community, rather than reducing our religious rhetoric to the lowest common denominator. Expansive language utilizes a wide lexicon of religious language without fearing any of them. In this approach, God, nature, mystery, spirit of life, and a thousand other names for that which is sacred, holy, or of worth, can be shared openly and part of the common language.

There are a thousand ways to engage and utilize Schleiermacher's approach to religion in our congregations, and I will be grateful for insight from my colleagues here and beyond. For the time being, the charge of this paper comes down to these questions for me:

Do we want our congregations to be places of engagement and transformation?

Do we want our spiritual lives to be ones of nourishment and hope and inspiration to face the broken world with courageous and loving hearts?

Do we want our worship experience to lift the hearts of our people so that they might find a way through the tangled thicket of a complex world and find renewed hope in humanity and our collective power?

Do we want to be reminded of our limitations while at the same time charged to embrace our sacred freedom?

Do we want a religion that saves lives, sometime literally, and casts the widest welcome our Universalist heritage can offer with a love that will not let our people go?

Do we want to let poetry and the arts seep into our bones and hearts enough to call us to our best selves and be healing balm when life shatters our heart?

Do we want to be reminded, each and every day that our intuition and our intellect are sacred? Do we want to proclaim the prophetic voice of Unitarianism that wisdom speaks from many sources, and that science and scripture, both, are sacred?

Do we want to be stopped in our tracks, raptured in awe and beauty in multiplied wonder where the presence of the holy is enfolding us in a love so fierce and tender that it seems to permeate our being with the proclamation: you are beloved, child of the most Holy?

I want the experience of religious community to find a sentiment, beyond particular semantics, similar to this author's experience of worship: "The city of God is coming down from heaven... The dwelling of God is among the peoples, and all the nations are welcome to God's abundant healing."<sup>31</sup> This is more than feeling. This is the gospel of inclusion, the proclamation of justice, and the embodied experience of the Holy. So to the charge, I say: Amen and Alleluia.

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<sup>31</sup> Gordon Lathrop, *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 24.