

Unitarians, Universalists, and Schleiermacher: A Response

By Molly Housh Gordon for the Prairie Group 2014

I must begin my response to the Rev. Burton Carley with thanks for his thought- and affect-provoking paper, which is as poetic as it is scholarly - a beautiful balance of romance and reason of which Schleiermacher surely would have approved.

I find rich food for thought and feeling throughout and many interesting threads to pick up and follow. For the sake of time, I will focus my response on Carley's arguments on behalf of piety and ultimate dependence and his call to a Unitarian Universalist pneumatology, both as foils to the individualism, which permeates our history and our present, and which our Transcendentalist forbears failed (and we ourselves often fail) to escape.

Living Deep

"I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life..."

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

In several places, Carley utilizes Schleiermacher's concept of piety and dependence to critique the way Unitarian Universalists seem to hold religious experience at arm's length.

Of the transient and the permanent in Unitarian Universalism, this critique of distance must surely be a permanent feature of our thought across the ages, as must its opposite. We journey together through an ever-cycling dialectic between meta-experience and experience itself, distance and closeness, knowing about religion and doing it.

Carley points to the rationally-minded furor raised from the Rev. Bill Sinkford's call to a language of reverence as one pole of the dialectic. I would point to the enthusiasm around contemporary new church starts focused upon experiential worship as a current swing of that pendulum.

In my fellowship-history congregation, both seem to exist at once, as a Forum group gathers downstairs each Sunday to learn about Religion, and a worship service is held upstairs to be religious. On despairing days, I admit that never the twain shall meet; on hopeful days I marvel that they *have met* and live together in one place.

This is the largest contemporary potential I see in Schleiermacher's synthesis, as it comes to us directly and through our Transcendentalist forbears: the call to remove all distance or intermediary and go deep into an experience of religion –not as an experience that requires us to 'check our brains at the door,' but one that invites the intellect into a conversation with intuition and life itself into the purifying fire of thought.

Further, this call to immersion instead of distance may also be a self-correcting step in our individual/community dialectic, because relationship cannot be fostered a step-removed. It requires encounter.

As Robert Merrihew Adams points out in his essay “Faith and Religious Knowledge,” the feeling of ultimate dependence is a relational one. “We can hardly be absolutely dependent unless there is something, other than ourselves, on which we absolutely depend.”¹

Further grounded in shared bodily experience, this living deep into the soul of the whole – this encounter with our ultimate dependence – can also be a call to relationship.

Getting Grounded

“We have a soul at times. / No one’s got it non-stop / For keeps. [...] / It rarely lends a hand / in uphill tasks, / like moving furniture, / or lifting luggage, / or going miles in shoes that pinch.”

- Wislawa Szymborska, “A Few Words on the Soul”²

In his final section, Carley utilizes Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists as an entry-point into an argument for a contemporary Unitarian Universalist pneumatology. He points out that a focus on the life of the spirit can bring us into piety, direct experience of universal transcendence, and relationship. Carley writes: “Our redemption from partiality, self-centeredness, and the sin of unconsciousness, is the quality of the spirit.”

In the tradition of the Transcendentalists, Carley then names a mystical experience (or perhaps we should call it an Intuition) of numinous transcendence, which “lifted [him] to a holy place,” and called him to consciousness and response. I have read beautiful accounts of such transcendence from Emerson and Thoreau, Parker and Fuller. Carley’s experience, too, is beautifully accounted in the Romantic style.

I wonder, though, if the call to a pneumatology with relational potential - one that brings us into connection rather than isolation - is exactly where Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists must part ways.

Moderate empiricism with idealism, as did the Transcendentalists using Kant’s transcendental idealism, and you get ‘experience,’ but only of an other-worldly plane – not something of the senses, but of a disembodied intuition that does not connect. Minds cannot touch minds; intuitions do not speak to one another.

When interpreted through the poetry of the Transcendentalists, wherein numinous experience comes seemingly out of the blue, I get the idea that religious experience might be based in ultimate feelings of dependence (in his essay “Self-Reliance,” Emerson uses the term ‘universal reliance’) that don’t require one to actually, physically, depend on much at all.

¹ Adams, Robert Merrihew. “Faith and Religious Knowledge.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*. Ed. Jacqueline Mariña. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Page 37.

² translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh.

In this world-view, it seems, the soul is with us, but “rarely lends a hand in uphill tasks,” and “slips off duty,” just “when our body goes from ache to pain.”³

I think of Henry David’s cabin in the woods... only two miles from the comforts and resources of the Thoreau family home – a privileged form of self-reliance, a body perhaps never asked to realize how truly it depends.

When we frame religion as transcending the finite by numinous journey into the infinite, the body and spirit are split, and real dependence exists not in the soul, which flits and flies in reverie, but in the body, which aches and degrades. This is a perennial problem of idealism alone – its purposeful or accidental detachment of the spiritual from the corporeal.

By my reading, Carley does not intend to perpetuate this separation. He reminds us that: “clay and consciousness and spirit are part of each other.” Yet, in the same passage, spirit is also something set above: “the glory and the fulfillment of our psycho-physical being.” In an application of Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists, romantic idealism perseveres.

From before the Transcendentalists, through their day, and on, we have tended to speak of spirit as something that quickens or gives life to our bodies, as though the earthly would be nothing without the airy. We speak of spirit as something that lifts us above, as though the infinite can be found only in the light shining through, and not *in* the humus itself, in the muck and the mud.

We posit Spirit as that additional thing which gives bodies meaning – making them more than ‘just bodies.’ In her compelling call to an eco-feminist pneumatology, theologian Sharon Betcher critiques this world view: “Western pneumatology has been preoccupied with prying the pneumatic body, or “soul” loose from corporeal limits, from its terrestrial tethers.”⁴ In this conception, spirituality finds the limits of the body a problem to be overcome. “Spirit, it would appear, hovers just above the flux and frustration of flesh.”⁵

Here then, into the Unitarian Universalist dialectic between empiricist and rationalist idealism, I would toss in an argument for the material (as organic, a la Whitehead, not as mechanistic, a la Spinoza), particularly as a further foil to our individualism. Bodies depend. Bodies connect. And the spirit depends and connects in and through them. We experience the infinite only in(the)finite.

Carley implies that what is missing in UU theology is a sustained sense of the spirit, but I would argue that perhaps more startlingly absent in contemporary UUism is a grounding of the spirit - its rooting in flesh and earth, which – this is a key point for me – *also*

³ Szymborska, Wislawa. “A Few Words on the Soul,” translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh

⁴ Betcher, Sharon. “Grounding the Spirit: An Eco-Feminist Pneumatology.” In *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophy for the Earth*. Ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. Page 328-329.

⁵ *ibid.* 321.

means in flux and frustration. If we do not acknowledge this, we risk perpetuating a theology that slips of duty when the body goes from ache to pain, or from hurt to oppression, or from careless consumption to environmental degradation.

I, for instance, have felt my ultimate dependence perhaps most powerfully not through some fleeting mystical experience, but through the sustained, finite, and bodily experience of chronic disease. Not a transcendent experience, and certainly not one that ‘lifts me up,’ but rather a thoroughly rooted and transforming one, in which I regularly find ‘holy ground,’ that moves and evolves and carries me deeper into connection.

What could a UU pneumatology look like, so grounded?

This is where Schleiermacher may perhaps have more to contribute to a relational pneumatology than our Transcendental forebears, as he rejects the pure idealism of Kant in favor of a Spinozan ‘higher realism,’ and roots his epistemology in a sensory, bodily-informed way of knowing that he called *affekt* [affect, in the English]. For Schleiermacher, according to Thankdeka, affect is a “physical fact of the human spirit rather than simply as another term that referred to the humans spirit [*Geist*] as disembodied.”⁶

In his second speech *On Religion*, Schleiermacher writes:

If the emanations of light – which happen completely without your efforts – did not affect your sense, if the smallest parts of the body, the tips of your finger, were not mechanically or chemically affected, if the pressure of weight did not reveal to you an opposition and a limit to your power, you would intuit nothing and perceive nothing.⁷

Through the tips of our fingers and the pressure of weight, this is a spirit *in touch*.

Though Schleiermacher himself does not locate the infinite within the finite – keeping them separate in order to maintain partial human freedom in the realm of the finite,⁸ this engagement with corporeal experience as the way in to religious experience is a place to start. Moderated with a relational and evolving materialism, perhaps we could move toward a sense of ultimate dependence that is bodily and real, that could locate our religious feeling *within* our finitude and our mortal, physical limits – not above them.

In this grounded place, we can touch the world and each other and experience a connected spirit within earthly limits. Further, in a grounded pneumatology, it is the spiritual experience of the literal dependence of our earthly bodies that bring us into mutual relationship with one another. Our heavy leaning on the web of all life and those nearest us in times of need and hunger is the source of lived, shared connection.

⁶ Thankdeka. “Affect Theology: A Roadmap for CGUUS.” Page 4.

⁷ Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Ed. Richard Crouter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Page 25.

⁸⁸ Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *The Christian Faith*. Ed. HR Mackintosh & JS Stewart Berkeley: The Apocryphile Press, 2011. Page 22.

There is surely more intellectual work to be done to find a truly grounded pneumatology. His affect theory may be a place to start, but Schleiermacher does not get us all the way there. As Thandeka points out in her essay “Schleiermacher, Feminism, and Liberation Theologies,” Schleiermacher did most of his work on affect in the realm of aesthetics, and largely left its deeper exploration out of his theology.⁹

The examples of Schleiermacher’s affect theory that Thandeka presents in this essay largely speak to the bodily experience of music, and from this reading I would argue that his work, based in aesthetics and music, doesn’t quite solve the “problem” of the body – that is, doesn’t quite give up seeing the body, in its finitude, as a problem, something to transcend through the experience of a more infinite beauty.

With the continued work of contemporary affect theology, I wonder, can we locate the spirit not just in beauty and music and art, but also in decay, disease, and ugliness? Can we witness the movement of the spirit, not just in its leapings, but in its sinkings; not in a nebulous and other-worldly infinity, but in the organic and relational finite itself, which is our only way in to the (in)finite?

This would be a step toward grounding, and, I would argue, toward a deeper, more lived sense of spiritual connection. As human creatures, when do we more powerfully experience both an ultimate dependence and therein a connection (with the people in our lives *and* with all beings), than in the universally earthly pangs of birth and death, or when we bleed, laugh, sweat, or sob?

It is within and through my bodily experience of finitude that I testify to a life of the spirit. It is a spiritual life in touch with the world and with all those upon whom I lean heavily and ultimately depend. It is challenging, transforming, ugly, and beautiful. It is flux and frustration. It is holy and real.

⁹ Thandeka. “Schleiermacher, Feminism, and Liberation Theologies.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*. Ed. Jacqueline Mariña. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Page 289.