

**LIVING**  
**IN THE GREAT FAMILY OF ALL SOULS**  
A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham (Unitarian Universalist)  
All Souls Sunday, October 30, 2011  
John A. Buehrens, Minister

“I am a living member of the great family of all souls.”  
William Ellery Channing  
(1780-1842)

Reading *Character* Wm. Ellery Channing

One of the grandest truths of religion is the supreme importance of character, of virtue. . .  
The grand heresy is to substitute any thing for this, whether creed, or form, or church.

No human being exists whose character can be proposed as a faultless model. But, could a perfect individual be found, we should only injure ourselves by indiscriminate, servile imitation; for much which is good in another is good in him alone, belongs to his peculiar constitution, has been the growth of his peculiar experience, is harmonious and beautiful only in combination with his other attributes, and would be unnatural, awkward and forced in a servile imitator. The very strength of emotion which in one man is virtue in another would be defect; for virtue depends on the balance which exists between the various principles of the soul; and that intenseness of feeling which, when joined with force of thought and purpose, is healthful and invigorating, would prove a disease . . . in a weak and sensitive mind. No man should part with his individuality, and aim to become another. No process is so fatal as that which would call all men into one mould. Every human being is intended to have a character of his own, to be what no other is, to do what no other can do. Our common nature is to be unfolded in boundless diversities. It is rich enough for infinite manifestations. It is to wear innumerable forms of beauty and glory. Every human being has a work to carry on within, duties to perform abroad, influences to exert which are peculiarly his, and which no conscience but his own can teach. Let him not, then, enslave his conscience to others, but act with the freedom, strength, and dignity of one whose highest law is in his own breast.

Offertory Anthem *Nearer My God, to Thee* Bethany  
Text by Sarah Flower Adams, English Unitarian, 1805-1848)  
Music by Lowell Mason, 1792-1882  
(named Music Director of First Parish in Medfield at age 17)

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In orthodox religion, it often seems what matters most is how you die, and the state of your soul. When his old aunt Louisa asked Henry David Thoreau in his last illness, “Have you made your peace with God?” the sage of Walden reportedly replied, “I’m not aware that we ever quarreled.”

In our approach, what matters most is how we live all along, even as we are dying; which we’re also doing all along, although we tend to deny it. And if we make mistakes along life’s way – as surely we all do – such mistakes are most often part of our denial of the reality of death itself; from pride; from the narcissistic assumption that we can, by cleverness and our own ability, outwit the fate we all face. Allow me an example based on the offertory anthem we just heard:

It may surprise you to learn that the author of the hymn *Nearer My God to Thee* was a Unitarian --- the English poet, Sarah Flower Adams. Like many in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Sarah had TB most of her life. She died of it at only 43. Thoreau had it, too. He made to 45. Death from TB, I’m told, is awful: like drowning. Her hymn became most famous when played, a century ago, while the *Titanic* sank, in April, 1912, played by the eight musicians after on the after deck. There are two tunes for the hymn. The one we just heard is by Lowell Mason, who at age 17 became director of music at nearby First Parish in Medfield (now UU) in 1809.

Now the sinking of the *Titanic* was a teaching moment in our religious history, because the designer and builder of the great ship, Thomas Andrews, Jr., of Belfast, was also a Unitarian! -- or, as they call our cousins around Belfast, a “Non-Subscribing Presbyterian.” Because even if you convert to the Baha’i faith in No. Ireland, they’d still ask, “But are you a Catholic Baha’i or a Protestant Baha’i?” Andrews was on board the *Titanic* when it went down. He told the captain that the ship was indeed unsinkable if only four of the watertight compartments were breached, but not the six that iceberg had torn. So abandon ship! It had at most two hours before sinking.

The sinking was not Andrew's fault, however. That came from two factors: orders to the captain from the owners to try to beat the speed record across the Atlantic, obeyed even through fog in an area of icebergs; and the decision to minimize the number of lifeboats in order to maximize the number of luxury cabins on the top decks. Andrews designed Titanic to have 64 lifeboats – more than enough for the ship's full capacity of passengers and crew. Instead, it carried only 16, enough for only half the 2200 people aboard on its maiden voyage.

Two men were responsible for this decision. One was the head of White Star Lines, J. Bruce Ismay, who was also aboard, and climbed onto one of the last lifeboats, after the women and children were loaded. The other was the chief investor behind White Star, the American banker, J. Pierpont Morgan, also scheduled to be aboard, but who cancelled at the very last moment.

After the catastrophe, Andrews, who went down with the crew, was promptly hailed as a hero. There's a stained glass window dedicated to him in the Unitarian church in Comber, No. Ireland. Ismay, suffering from a severe case of survivor guilt, was shamed and hounded into self-isolation for the remaining 25 years of his life. He, too, was raised Unitarian, but had left to marry well. So had the Morgan's father, son of a Boston Unitarian and abolitionist minister, John Pierpont, for whom he named his son. But the great banker, in the one year he survived after the *Titanic*, surprised many. To keep the US-European economic ship from sinking -- having had to rescue it once before, after the Panic of 1907 -- Morgan supported starting the Federal Reserve system; and also a progressive income tax, taxing the wealthy at a higher rate than smaller earners.

So today, when I hear loud but historically ignorant voices calling for undoing those reforms, well, my heart sinks. This is what happens in times of financial catastrophe. Hearts sink. Some regress: Save *me!* from long-term thinking about anyone else; from any imaginative compassion for future generations. This no longer surprises me, but does disappoint me.

Earlier this morning some of us were discussing these issues in conjunction with our First Parish "book of the year," *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, by Karen Armstrong. I won't repeat her whole argument: that our old, reptilian brains are addicted to self-serving, short-term survival

and profit, and that we can only be saved by more, well, imaginative compassion. But if you missed this morning's discussion, I invite to the one that will take place in November.

What I want to emphasize this morning is that the difference between Andrews and Ismay and Morgan is not who survived or how or when how well that person died, but how and for what concerns each tried to live, even as each went down in defeat, as we all will before forces more powerful than ourselves.

Ismay and Morgan's father left the Unitarian fold for fortune and more superficial, fashionable faith, but I agree with HH the Dalai Lama, "Whether a person is a religious believer does not matter much. Far more important is that they be a good human being." [Armstrong, pp. 23-24]

Nor is good living, in my view, a matter of imitating only one good model, whether Jesus or the Buddha or any other. Channing and other early Unitarians insisted that there is something of the divine in each of us. That the whole purpose of human life is to realize that the goodness, mercy, benevolence, compassion and justice and other virtues that theologians traditionally attribute to God are not just in some heavenly realm beyond this life. They are potentially within each of us -- in differing forms and combinations, certainly, and not wholly present in any perfect human -- but more accessible and achievable than old style Calvinist preaching about predestination and utter human depravity had ever suggested.

Channing didn't deny that human beings could be short-sighted, greedy, selfish, or even brutish. But he was disinclined to give up on people. He saw each as a living member of the great family all souls." When I served as a minister at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, that phrase appeared at the top of the order of service every week, as it does here today. And when I left, the congregation gave me a calligraphy certificate that now hangs in my study, thanking me for my time with them, and and proclaiming me *still* such a living member of the family of all souls with all the rights and perquisites (and responsibilities) attendant thereto!

**All Souls**. Lately, in working with families who have lost loved ones and parents, I have been very conscious that no real human family is without hurt and tragedies, challenges and flaws.

Our beloved dead were *not* all saints; many far from it. And just as each of us have a character that bears some of the marks and potential of the divine, so also we each come from families where the souls who went before us were less than fully enlightened and realized. And then, as the British poet Philip Larkin once put it, in even stronger language than I will use here:

They [mess] us up our mums and dads.  
They may not mean to, but they do.  
They hand on all the faults they had  
And add some extra, just for you!

But they were [messed] up in their turn  
By fools in old style hats and coats  
Who half the time were sappy-stern  
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.  
It deepens like the coastal shelf.  
Get out as quickly as you can.  
And don't have any kids yourself.

As one critic put, in such words Larkin captures our despair so acutely as to render it absurd. The *real* challenge is to defy such cynicism. And to live fully, mindfully, compassionately, thinking not only of ourselves, but of coming generations. This week, as Gwen and I celebrate the birth on Wednesday of our second grandchild, Hannah Rose Murray, who came into this world on Wednesday, 8 lbs and 1 oz., out in San Francisco, I can think of very little else.

The world into which we welcome her is still too sadly addicted to selfishness, short-sighted thinking, lack of empathy, blaming, reactivity, and polarization. But there is little we can do that doesn't begin with ourselves: trying, as Gandhi put it, to "be the world that we want see" for her. Within family, I've learned, the secret to a good marriage is to be able to look in the mirror when you are angry or disappointed in your spouse and then say several times, "You know:

You're no prize either!" Or as aT-shirt I once saw on a teen put it succinctly: "Only YOU can prevent narcissism!"

We like to think that we can be people of maturity and compassion simply by thinking we are. But as one of my mentors put it, "We must not trust in the immaculate conception of virtue, but instead practice the social incarnation of the good that we love" -- one step at a time.

"No one ever told us we had to study our lives," said poet Adrienne Rich, "make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history/ or music, that we should begin/ with the simple exercises first/ and slowly go on trying/ the hard ones, practicing till strength / and accuracy became one with the daring/ to leap into transcendence, take the chance/ of breaking down the wild arpeggio or faulting the full sentence of the fugue./ --And in fact we can't live like that: we take on everything at once before we've even begun/ to read or mark time, we're forced to begin in the midst of the hard movement,/ the one already sounding as we are born."

And so we come here, week by week, to practice and to re-learn, step by step, the pathway to spiritual maturity, to greater wisdom and compassion. For how and when we come to die matters far less than how we, now together as living members of the great family of all souls, lead lives that, in the end, are worth dying for. However imperfectly I do it --and you know my very worst- - I love working at it with all of you, fellow pilgrims here at this shared campsite of Needham. May we continue to do it well in the time we still have remaining. Amen, and amen.

\*Hymn 86

*Blessed Spirit of My Life*

Shelley Jackson Denham

Benediction

And now in our going,  
May the light and love of the Eternal  
Bless us and keeps us;  
Shine upon us, and also out from within us,  
Be gracious unto us, and grant us peace.  
For this is the day we are to live.  
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
Go in peace. Amen.

Postlude

*Amen*

Michael Pretorius