

CHARLES AND THE PUDDING

First Unitarian Church Saint Louis, October 23, 2011

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Religions of the world evoke a supreme oneness, a transcendent and overwhelming unity. There is a promise spoken in all ages and cultures, to generations and nations, that if we live by the “Way”, “Dharma”, or the “Will of Heaven” that oneness will come and nations will be just, and calm. Centuries ago Lao Tzu wrote, “Though they live within sight of their neighbors, and crowing cocks and barking dogs are heard across the way, yet they leave each other alone while they grow old and die in peace.” Instead, in the real world we get hurt and we get angry, striking out in selfishness or defense. We compete with one another or fear one another. Yet still we dream though we so often fall short of our dreams. Parents, looking upon the innocent face of a newborn may declare that they will be the perfect parents, but then short tempers and daily stress and child-born barbarism take their toll. No one is perfect, not one, “yet each night a child is born is a holy night”, as Rev. Sophia Fahs put it. This is because if we let go of our dreams or our ideals then we have nothing. If our dreams become small then we become small. If we see our dreams only as fantasy, not as demands upon our lives and spirits to grow, then we become mere phantoms, transient and meaningless.

In this congregation we speak of unity, asserting that “under the sky we are all one people”. So it was also with the Reverend Charles Chauncy. This incredible visionary who was present at the very formation of our nation, had a vision, he saw the wholeness and unity of all souls. He believed in Unitarian and Universalist ideas before either formed denominations in this country. He saw our UU unity even though he prefigured both. He believed in and worked for unity of people across denominational lines, and even across the Atlantic Ocean. Yet he remained unapologetically elitist despite his vision.

Chauncy served as a Congregationalist minister of a church that would later become Unitarian. During his sixty year career he led his congregation through many issues of the day such as “the French and Indian wars, the controversy over the proposed establishment of the Anglican episcopacy in America, political events from the Stamp Act through the Revolution, the rise of the Enlightenment, [and] social changes in Boston...” [Edward Griffin, *Old Brick*.] Though he supported our national independence, writing pamphlets and speaking on what was called “The American Cause.” He also organized American clergy and corresponded with English dissenting clergy to prevent the domination of the Church of England within British colonies. It was very striking at this time to reach across “the pond” and across denominational lines to create a unity of vision about how religion and government should work together. Chauncy’s guiding spirit and vision was always of unity and wholeness.

His effort to unify the clergy ultimately failed. He did receive an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of Edinburgh, and many other honors and accolades. He was, in short, one of the leading intellectuals of 18th-century America. On the downside he was also an unapologetic elitist. He believed the clergy were of a higher order. Though Unitarian in many ways his theology was still Trinitarian and his preaching remained deeply authoritarian all

his days. He fell short and did not live fully by his own vision of what he knew to be true. He even became afraid of sharing the dream. So it is ours to carry that dream forward.

The sad irony for many Christians is that, in their great struggle against fear of schism and difference of opinion, they have created endless schism and difference of opinions. For example, a Baptist preacher and his wife decided they needed a dog. Ever mindful of their congregation, they knew the dog must also be Baptist. They visited an expensive kennel and explained their needs to the manager, who assured them he had just the dog for them. When the dog was produced, the manager began giving it commands. "Fetch the Bible," he commanded. The dog bounced to the bookshelf, scrutinized the books, located the Bible, and brought it to the manager. The manager then said, "Find Psalms 23". The dog, showing marvelous dexterity with his paws, leafed thru the Bible, found the correct passage, and pointed to it with his paw. Duly impressed, the preacher and his wife purchased their Baptist dog. That evening a group of parishioners came to visit. The preacher and his wife began to show off the dog, having him locate several Bible verses. The visitors were amazed. Finally, one man asked "Can the dog do any normal dog tricks?" "Let's see" said the preacher. Pointing his finger at the dog, he commanded, "Sit." That worked fine so then he said, "Heel!" expecting the dog to come by his side. Instead, the dog immediately jumped up on a chair, placed one paw on the preacher's forehead and began to howl. "I've been swindled!" The preacher cried out in shock and disbelief, pushing the dog away. "This dog is no Baptist, he's a Pentecostal!"

I don't know if Charles Chauncy had a dog, but he would not have wanted a Pentecostal one. Chauncy was the foremost preacher of Colonial Boston when it was one of the richest cities in colonial America. He became famous in the 1740s by leading the "Old light" resistance to the Colonial predecessor of Pentecostalism, which we now call the "Great Awakening". I find that movement in some ways similar to the rise of "praise worship" and "Pentecostal" style religion in recent decades. Some scholars say the Great Awakening revival arose in part from people who had thought of America as a rough place in need of taming and thus were uncomfortable with their new found material wealth, and the industrial prosperity of New England. Whatever the reason, during the 1730s and 40s there arose many new preachers who would walk out into the open air to speak and stir people's souls. There was a great energy and vibrancy in the religious lives of Christian Americans. Many spoke of the Holy Spirit overcoming them and they would either burst into tears of sorrow at evocations of human depravity or they would be filled with joy in the Spirit.

While many embraced its abundance, Chauncy opposed the Great Awakening directly. He did not see it bringing any good to religion. Chauncy knew that a person moved by emotion could just as easily hate or kill as love. He knew that justice and moral behavior needed discipline not just enthusiasm. For Rev. Chauncy the spiritual life did begin with emotion, but it was essential to use rational thought and the disciplines of moral development, in response to spiritual feelings in order to progress towards wholeness. Chauncy affirmed the importance of emotion, both for being convinced of one's sinfulness and in knowing the joy of salvation. To put it in the image of this sermon: we begin the religious life with tasty appetizers of spiritual experience, but then must move on to a main course, and only then can we enjoy our just desserts, the sweet pudding of union and wholeness.

The response to the Great Awakening was varied. There is a story of Benjamin Franklin, scientist that he was, who doubted Whitefield's claim that God's power had allowed him to

preach to ten thousand people in the open air. Franklin went to one of Whitefield's sermons, and then walked slowly away, pacing evenly, to measure how far his voice projected in the open air. He then used that distance as the radius of a circle, figured the area of a circle with that radius, and divided that by an average of two square feet per person and decided that Whitefield's claim was true. As to the content and theology of the sermon Franklin paid little attention. Those who followed such sermons were seeking certainty. Instead of being humble before God's predestined judgment of souls, people were looking for evidence of their destiny and found a happy confirmation of salvation in "enthusiasm."

While many were getting on board the Revivalist train, so to speak, Charles Chauncy, after encountering Whitefield personally and getting into an argument with him, published a work titled *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England* (1743) and preached a sermon: "Enthusiasm: Described and Cautioned Against." In this sermon Chauncy defined an enthusiast as one who "mistakes the workings of his own passions for divine communications, and fancies himself immediately inspired by the SPIRIT OF GOD, when all the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination." Even the most energetic sermon can be full of bad ideas, exclusive and arrogant. It is as the author Herman Melville wrote in *Moby Dick*, "Hell is an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling; and since then perpetuated through hereditary dyspepsias..."

Our way of religion is founded by people who have inspired us and guided us on how to be reasonable, intelligent and rational about religion. Yet at the same time we may fear that we are too cold, and unemotional. The Universalist Christian Carlton Pearson spoke at our General Assembly a year ago. He was an African American preacher that had been spiritually "adopted" by Oral Roberts. Pearson led a congregation of thousands in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His whole career had proclaimed that all people needed was salvation through belief in Jesus Christ. Then one day he was watching a program on people dying in Rwanda he realized that these people did not need to be saved from Hell in an afterlife because they were in Hell now. He realized that these people were not in Hell because of their wrong faith about the next world, but because of the lack of human compassion in this world. He began to preach the ideas of universal reconciliation, of "Inclusion". Instantly he got in to trouble. When he continued speaking what he knew to be true, Oral Roberts turned against him, his congregation dwindled from thousands to about two hundred and fifty, and they lost their building and land. Seeking refuge they finally settled at the Unitarian Universalist All Souls Church in Tulsa. When Pearson spoke at our national assembly he said that we had the most compelling, dynamic, and life transforming message, but we communicate it in the most boring way possible. So it is that we seek to reintegrate the head and the heart, thought and emotional experience.

One great irony of the Great Awakening is that Even though Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield spoke for God's supreme power in determining our salvation or damnation, what it encouraged in their listeners was the idea that they must make a choice. Likewise Chauncy emphasized the capability of the human mind to make choices and sift, with God's help as he would put it, the wheat from the chaff. While other preachers debased the ability of human beings to know and understand Chauncy and those who came after affirmed our power. We believe not only that people should be free to make choices, but that we must make choices and that when we are given the skills and knowledge to choose well we will make the world and our living better. Unitarianism is named for our problems with the inscrutable

doctrine of the Trinity, but our core has always been about human agency, about the necessity of people claiming our power to make the world a better place and to nurture human character. We affirm freedom so as to be more responsible and just.

Chauncy believed likewise and thus disagreed with the idea that some souls were irredeemable. It rankled him, it seemed wrong, to insist on eternal condemnation for most when the scriptures clearly stated that Christ came so that all persons would be saved, and that God would reconcile all things. It seemed wrong that people should have the God given power to learn and grow and think but yet be prevented from using that development for reaching the ultimate goal of faith. As early as 1762 Chauncy began to think that Christ's death had saved all souls, not only an elect few. This idea drew from his faith in the moral progress of humanity and the benevolence and absolute unity of God. There would be punishment for sin, but only in proportion to the crime, and over time its purpose was to cleanse the soul and prepare it for entry into heaven. He wrote, "Though I affirm that all men will finally be happy, yet I deny not but that many of them will be miserable in the next state of existence and to a great degree and for a long time, in proportion to the moral depravity they have contracted in this."

Finally, about ten years before he died he put these ideas into a manuscript evoking this powerful image of wholeness and unity. *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Nations: or the Salvation of All Men ...* was first drafted in 1750s, but not published, anonymously no less, until 1784. Its title was inspired by Colossians 1:26 about Christ as "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints." And yet he was afraid of how this vision would be received, because it required questioning a basic tenet of Christian orthodoxy. Instead of speaking the truth fully hid the mystery a little longer.

That his friends ... "recognized it as a dangerous work is indicated by their use of a secret shorthand reference to it, "The pudding." It was a work they relished like a forbidden sweet. Its danger lay in the fact that it denied the idea of eternal punishment by arguing that all souls would eventually be saved." [Robinson, *The Unitarians and Universalists*.] He also published in 1784 *The Benevolence of the Deity*. Chauncy asserted that God not only had the desire, but the will, the power and the plan whereby all would be to do this. He wrote, "As the First Cause of all things is infinitely benevolent, 'tis not easy to conceive, that he should bring mankind into existence, unless he intended to make them finally happy."

Sadly, Rev. Chauncy was very much an elitist. Yet despite these high ideals Chauncy was still an elitist. We so often fall short of our own faith and grand hopes. Chauncy delayed publication of *The Pudding* "partly out of fear of being linked with the founding father of American Universalism, John Murray. Chauncy remained very much a part of the established clergy of New England, supported by the taxes of the township. At the same time that Chauncy was secretively passing around his "pudding," John Murray arrived in America and began preaching these ideas openly, but without the funding that came from being legally "established." Remember, our nation and our constitution, with its "disestablishment clause," had not yet come into existence. Most of the early Universalists, found themselves allied with the Baptists, Quakers, independent revivalists, and other dissenting sects, who were leading the fight for an absolute separation of church and state. Chauncy had stood against the absolute establishment of the Church of England. However he now saw Murray and others as a disorderly threat to established, moneyed, order. Chauncy was afraid not only that the more orthodox would perceive his message as mere libertinism, he was afraid of being identified with

people who were lower class than he. A Biographer, Mr. Lippy wrote, Chauncy believed "the laymen should simply follow the lead of the clergy who were, after all, the theological professionals." Chauncy feared the faith of the common rabble. Despite his radical, compelling, exciting theology he was imperfect in its application. He failed to reach out and preach out the fullness of the gospel he knew in his heart. I encourage you to think of the ways you may have fallen short. It is a demanding theology to affirm human unity. Think of the people you were afraid to share your faith with because you feared being rejected or misunderstood.

Rev. Carl G Seaburg wrote, "Through our temporary lives the great currents of history run. Let us keep the channels open and free so not to obstruct purposes greater than our own. Let us keep our minds set upon the high goals that here bind us into one sharing fellowship of loving hearts." I encourage you with the story of Charles and the pudding to share what you know is sweet and true and good. To quote Hosea Ballou: "Share it with women and men, give them not hell, but hope and courage."

STORY FOR ALL AGES

A Muddy Child – adapted from *A Lamp in Every Corner*, by Janeen K. Grohsmeyer

Hosea Ballou was born the eleventh child of his mother and father. Can you imagine having ten brothers and sisters who were older than you to play with you or to pick on you? When he was only two years old their mother died and Hosea was raised by his sisters. Like many boys he loved to play out of doors. He would get all dirty and then his sisters had to wash him and his clothes. One day he got very muddy and the sisters complained to his father. Hosea's father said, "Hosea, you cannot play in the mud any more. Work to keep your clothes clean." Everyone knew this rule was especially important on Sunday because his father was a preacher and they had to go to church early with him and set a good example. One Sunday, when the family was getting ready to go to church, the sisters got Hosea clean and dressed first. Then they could focus on their own dresses and tresses. Hosea went outside to play while waiting and he found a puddle. He realized that he could make a cool miniature river by digging a trench with a stick, and then he imagined boats floating on that river and people fishing on its banks. But as he played he accidentally splattered mud on his clothes and face. His sisters were furious when they saw him. His father was very angry. "There must be a punishment," his father said. "This whole week you must do whatever chores your sisters ask, you must help them in all things with no play and no complaining. Do you understand?" He demanded. Hosea looked at the ground nodding but thinking of his father's anger. Then he asked, "Do you still love me father?" "Of course I love you!" his dad said, shocked at the question. "I will always love you, and because of that I will also correct you so that you will know how to live well with others." Hosea remembered this lesson. When he grew up and became a preacher like his father, and like me, in 1851 many people were arguing about who God would save, because that is a concern of Christians. At a big assembly Hosea Ballou gave a great speech on the matter. In it he said, "If your child should fall in the mud and dirty its clothes and body, and you clean that child and give it new clothes, do you love your child because you have washed it, or do you clean your child because you love it?"