

SPIRITUAL FREEDOM: WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING AND CHRISTOPHER BOLLAS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gregory V. Wilson
The First Unitarian Church of Baltimore
August 22, 2004

Readings

THE FREE MIND

I call that mind free which masters the senses, and which recognizes its own reality and greatness:

Which passes life not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting, and seeking after righteousness.

I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith:

Which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come; which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.

I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstances, and is not the creature of accidental impulse:

Which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.

I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to human opinion:

Which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few, and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world.

I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past, nor live on its old virtues:

But which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience, . and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.

I call that might free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering:

Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.

I call that mind free which is cast off all fear but that of wrongdoing, and which no menace or peril can enthrall:

Which is calm the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, though all else be lost."

William Ellery Channing

“There are two visions of America. One precedes our founding fathers and finds its roots in the harshness of our puritan past. It is very suspicious of freedom, uncomfortable with diversity hostile to science, unfriendly to reason, contemptuous of personal autonomy. It sees America as a religious nation. It views patriotism as allegiance to God. It secretly adores coercion and conformity. Despite our constitution, despite the legacy of the Enlightenment, it appeals to millions of Americans and threatens our freedom.

“The other vision finds its roots in the spirit of our founding revolution and in the leaders of this nation who embraced the age of reason. It loves freedom, encourages diversity, embraces science and affirms the dignity and rights of every individual. It sees America as a moral nation, neither completely religious nor completely secular. It defines patriotism as love of country and of the people who make it strong.. It defends all citizens against all unjust coercion and irrational conformity.

“This second vision is our vision. It is the vision of a free society. We must be bold enough and strong enough to defend it against all its enemies.”

Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, Co-founder of Americans for Religious Liberty

Service, The Birmingham Temple, Farmington Hills, MI, October 21, 1988.

SERMON

What I would like to talk about this morning is something that came to me when I was reading some of the works of William Ellery Channing. and also the works of psychoanalytical practitioner and author Christopher Bollas. Bollas is contemporary, writing at a time in which he feels democracy is being threatened; and Channing was writing in the early 19th century, and he praises the Massachusetts state legislature for protecting civil liberties, honoring the rights of citizens . I find both of these works insightful and helpful, in my work as a pastoral counselor, in my work as a minister in the parish, as a Unitarian Universalist and as a citizen.

For William Ellery Channing, the essence of spiritual power and spiritual freedom is not power from an external source; it is a power that evolves from within the person in a particular environment. He addresses these innate human qualities in his sermon, “Spiritual Freedom” in which he talks about spiritual power as power from within himself. I like the fact that his whole perspective of spirituality is about what happens within us. It is focused in on the mind. And Channing connects our spiritual lives and the formation of our inner life with civil liberties.

“I now proceed, as I proposed, to show, that civil or political liberty is of little worth, but as it springs from, expresses, and invigorates this spiritual freedom. I account civil liberty as the chief good of states, because it accords with, and ministers to, energy and elevation of mind... Liberty which does not minister to action and the growth of power, is only a name, is no better than slavery... We may learn, that the chief good and the most precious fruit of civil liberty, is spiritual freedom and power, by considering what is the chief evil of tyranny . I know that tyranny does evil by invading men’s outward interests, by making property and life insecure, by robbing the laborer to pamper the noble and King. But its worst influence is *within*. Its chief curse is, that it breaks and tames the spirit, sinks man in his own eyes, takes away vigor of thought and action, substitutes for conscience an outward rule, makes him abject, cowardly, a parasite and a cringing slave. This is the curse of tyranny. It wars with the soul, and thus it wars with God. ... We here see the chief curse of tyranny; and this should teach us that civil freedom is a blessing, chiefly as it reverences the human soul, and ministers to its growth and power. Without this inward, spiritual freedom, outward liberty is of little worth. ”
(William Ellery Channing, excerpts from *Spiritual Freedom*, preached May 26, 1830.)

Channing connects who we are as spiritually free individuals with how we are governed. In this sermon, as he is addressing the Massachusetts Legislature, he is saying that the highest function of

government is to create the highest value of what it means to be human, to enhance the inner world of the human. So for those who govern us, their goal is to keep our inner worlds in mind as they go about the process of governing. Those who govern us are to keep our psychological and spiritual health in their minds as they create legislation.

In our present cultural context we must ask the question, who is governing in relation to the social, legal, political, cultural and relational activities of our daily lives? This is the question that drove Jamie Court to write the book *Corporateeering* in 2003. Do corporate-generated values govern American life today? If so, then Channing would be addressing this sermon to the business community. Robert Reich, President Clinton's first Secretary of labor, in March of 2001 had this to say, "There is no countervailing power in Washington, Business is in complete control of the machinery of government." (Robert B. Reich, "Corporate Power in Overdrive," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2001.) When local communities and states have tried to set boundaries, businesses and other countries have appealed to the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the will of the people was subverted. The WTO determined the process of legislation. The question of who is governing is a serious question and an appropriate one for us as Unitarian Universalists to engage. The core issue for Channing, and for Unitarian Universalism, is the relationship between those who govern and the evolution of the inner mind. In order for there to be social justice there must be protection of civil liberties between those who govern and those who are governed. If not, there is no spiritual freedom as Channing describes it.

I don't know how many of you have read the book *Unequal Protection* by Thom Hartmann, who was a speaker at GA, not this year but last year. The book is about how corporations got the rights of citizenship, and in the beginning of his book he talks about how culture is created, "A culture is a collection of shared beliefs about how things are. Those beliefs are associated with myths and histories that form a self-reinforcing loop, and the collection of these beliefs and histories form the stories that define a culture. Usually unnoticed, like the air we breathe, these stories are rarely questioned." (p.8) What I want to notice about what Hartmann is saying is that there is the danger of a culture's becoming a reinforcing loop, which means it is a closed system, which is not open to new thought. It must interpret new experiences through pre-established belief systems.

In the Responsive Reading we just read by Channing, *The Free Mind*, speaking of Spiritual Freedom, he encourages us to accept new thought, to grow. Channing is saying we should be open to new knowledge and not be passively framed by outward circumstances.

Historically governments have had a belief system and a cultural structure, and they have imposed those beliefs and that structure on individuals. Channing does just the opposite. He says we have to move to the inner world of the person, and structure the outer world so that it nurtures that inner world. Governments and Corporations don't necessarily attend to individuals. Historically, governing systems have not done that and governing systems that have not been attentive to the individual have moved toward tyranny. When governing systems don't attend to the individual, the individual begins to exist for the state. Channing says what we need to do is create the state for the individual. He turned what was historically true upside-down, and his thought is honoring to the individual.

Christopher Bollas in his book called *Being a Character* has a chapter called "The Fascist State of Mind." He says in this chapter that he is playing with those words, Fascist State of Mind,

because we have two fascist states, one in our minds, the other a way of organizing government, business, and labor. His question was, how do we have fascist national states, how does that happen? How does a family man become a dispassionate, efficient killer, as described by the chief of the SS to his top commanders in 1943: "Most of you know what it means when 100 corpses lie there, or when 500 corpses lie there, or when 1,000 corpses lie there. To have gone through this--and apart from a few exceptions caused by human weakness--to have remained decent, that has made us great."

What needs to happen is the transformation of the inner world of the individual, to become fascist within himself or herself first and then fascist toward others. On the one hand we have Channing talking about the free mind, engaging with all this kind of energy, and on the other we have Bollas saying that all of us have the potential to be participants in a fascist state, beginning in our own inner world. I wonder if that is not what Channing is guarding against.

Before we look at how we go about acquiring a fascist self-experience, let me read two definitions of fascism. One is from the dictionary, which says that fascism is "a system of government that is characterized by rigid one-party dictatorship, forcible suppression of opposition, private economic enterprise under centralized governmental control, belligerent nationalism, racism, and militarism." (Webster) Bollas's definition helps us make the transition from the national state to the inner world. His definition includes Fascism's extolling the virtue of the state (and remember we concluded from Channing's work that the individual is not made for the state, but the state for the individual) and Bollas described the fascist state as "an organic creation driven by the militant will of the masses, in sharp contrast indeed to the federal republic encumbered by checks and balances, dividing power so that the people remain individually free to speak their minds in a pluralistic society." Bollas goes on to say that our minds are made up of checks and balances. For example, when I am driving a car, and I see a light yellow, something comes into my mind, and I say the light is yellow, and it's going to turn red and I need to stop. That's an internal check and balance. Another example of that, let's say that I am in an argument with somebody I care about, and as I'm arguing, I've got this little voice in my head that says, "Don't say that; that would be hurtful." Or "Don't say that because that's irrelevant and it won't help you make your argument." So I've got this internal dialog happening inside my head. But when the arguing gets intense, some of us are vulnerable to the collapsing of that kind of observing, internal voice, that kind of internal checks and balance in our heads--some of us are vulnerable to that collapsing. And I know that when that collapses, I say things that are hurtful. I say things that I wish I had never said. I lose my capacity to be empathetic and have compassion, the very aspects of life that mark human maturity. What Bollas is saying is that when internal checks and balances collapse, we are moving toward inner tyranny. We are moving toward inner fascism, murdering our capacity for compassion. And if there are enough things that happen in my life so that that voice, that "observing eye" as I call it, collapses permanently, I'm more vulnerable to participate in an oppressive culture, because I don't have that inner checks and balances.

This is how I understand it -- If we live in a system of inner tyranny, or external tyranny, we lose the capacity to live in the ambiguity of life. Bollas is warning us that when we live in a system of inner or outer tyranny, we have a particular vulnerability to kill off parts of our inner self.

I was thinking that from a counseling perspective, I have encountered many folks who have gone through a divorce and who have said to me, "I will never invest in a relationship like I invested in that relationship, because it is just too painful." When somebody says that, what they are saying is,

some of the best of who I am, the part of me that I can invest in a relationship, invest in another person, in this life, is going to go away. I'm not going to do it because it is too painful. We create a belief that the dreams and hopes I had in this life are not for me, and every time my dreams and hopes speak up, I need to kill them, because I made the decision, "Not in my lifetime. My dreams will not come true," and rather than grieve I become stuck in my own personal negative reinforcing loop. In this case I am vulnerable to joining oppressive groups or to experiencing depression.

Bollas is saying that at that point we have killed a part of ourselves. How many of you are entrepreneurs and have said that "I will never have another partner because that partner betrayed me." Or "I will never reveal something about myself because when I have shared about myself, that was used against me." How many of us have moved through life and given up dreams that we once had, and made statements like "well that's not going to be for me in this life." Bollas is saying that at that point we have killed off parts of ourselves, and that makes us vulnerable to participate in oppressive states, internal and external. He also says something that I find very interesting, very helpful, and very confronting. He says that there is a system of moving from a liberal, free thinking mind that has its own kind of legislative process, with checks and balances within itself, that participates in a democratic society, to a fascist mind, with an "ideology that eliminates all opposition."

Bollas says that there are eight stages of moving from a free state to a fascist state. The eight stages are Distortion, Decontextualization, Denigration, Caricature, Character assassination, Change of Name, Categorization as Aggregation, and Absence of Reference. These stages move through a process of distorting the opponent's view, taking the views out of context, belittling the views, belittling the individual, discrediting the opponent's personal character, eliminating his or her proper name and identity, and finally simply not referring to the opponent or his or her views at all. The opponent has become "a disposable non-entity."

The first stage is distortion, distorting the truth about the view of your opponent slightly or big-time. I was thinking, just read the newspaper. You don't have to look far, on either side.

The second stage is decontextualization. What does that mean? Well, that means "911 is like Pearl Harbor." What you do at that point is you take the feelings, events, and the reasons of Pearl Harbor and you put those on 911. And you understand 911, not from the here and now dynamics of 911, but from the historical understanding of Pearl Harbor. ("Entertainment is becoming history" --William Erwin Thompson) In a relationship, decontextualization looks like this, "You always do that. Remember two years ago?" I take the events of two years ago and impose them on the events of here and now. I distort the contextual understanding by referencing the historical event, which helps manipulate the person's mind to come around to my point of view. Decontextualization.

The third stage is denigration, belittling the person's views, a process that reduces conversation by replacing reason (the ideation of the disagreement) with emotion (affect).

From here we move easily to the fourth stage, caricature, where you belittle the person. Just turn on any comedian's show in the evening and you will see we are belittling our politicians on both sides and having great fun at it. We make fun of people that think differently all the time. We belittle. We shame. In fact one thing I noticed about these eight characteristics is it seems to me they are all shame based. They don't honor the person for who he or she is in the here and now. So now when I

think of John Kerry, all I see is this huge head of hair, because that's the caricature in the cartoons, even to the point where I don't hear what he says about health care. I don't hear what he says about the issues, because the power of the imagination to move in with images sometimes takes over how I think about a person, so I really don't know what they are about. I can remember working with some folks who would come in and they would be passionately hating a particular candidate. And I would say well how are they voting? They don't know how they're voting, but they're hating the candidate. I remember thinking "How does that happen? It doesn't make sense to me." This is how that happens--denigration and characterization, making cartoons of people and their viewpoints.

The fifth stage is character assassination--discrediting the personal character of our opponent. We might see this in political ads--the non-profit organizations running ads like the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth against Kerry, or the story about McCain's "black baby."

The sixth stage is change of name-- I think this is crucial not only in what is going on in our national life, but also personally. Changing the name is the first rule of conflict. Objectifying the enemy, objectifying the other person means that I am no longer yelling at another person. I am yelling at the objectified name. So we create names for enemies. How many of us ever call people we love a name, which makes it easier for us to be mean to the people we love. How much easier is it to do that to people of different color skin, with less education, or living in a hut on undeveloped land rich with resources (we call them "savages," not "mothers and fathers and children.") When we call a person a name that is not their name, it is objectifying. And when we do that it gives us permission to be mean to the person or to eliminate a group of people.

The seventh stage is categorization as aggregation, in which the opponent's identity is lost as you lump him in with others, "They all say that" or "She's just a hysterical woman."

And finally the eighth stage, the absence of reference, at which point you simply don't include a group of people or particular thought in the conversation. How many third, fourth, fifth parties do we hear about? How many times have we done something and we have prayed that our community doesn't bring it up, because if we don't mention it, it will go away? How many times have I said, I don't want to talk about that anymore, because it is confronting. How many times have we said, if we just leave this item off the table and not talk about it, we may get our idea through. The absence of reference.

We can use the work of Channing and Bollas to develop a lens through which we can evaluate what is going on in our culture and in the inner worlds of citizens. For Unitarian Universalists, the end of civil liberties is the end of a way of being in the world. We must answer the call of our faith ancestors to defend civil liberties and expand protection of civil liberties between the people and any governing system.

Benediction

Let us go from this place with the gracefulness of the eagle, the gentleness of the rolling brook, the steadfastness of the mountains of the earth of which we are a part,

May we be aware of the wisdom of the ages, attentive to who we are as Unitarian Universalists, and may we have the willingness to act in the direction our insight and passions move us.