

## SERMON FOR JUNE 27, 2010, AT UUCH

### Channing and Our Heritage of Skepticism

*Disclaimer: Before I begin let me make it clear that the opinions in this sermon are mine alone and they have not been officially cleared by the Program Committee, nor the CoCo, nor the COW, much less the Unitarian-Universalist Association. I do want to leave some time at the end for you to respond with your opinions if you'd like to.*

When I met with the organizing committee of the Habitat for Humanity's Apostle Build group, I joked about which Apostle each church might represent -- and I volunteered that our congregation could represent Doubting Thomas -- you know the disciple who said he would doubt that Jesus arose from the dead until he put his finger in Jesus' wound. De Valckenaere, a Belgian aphorist once wrote, "There would be fewer false prophets if there were more Doubting Thomases willing to put their finger in the wound." So you might say that I am a humble follower of Doubting Thomas.

### CHANNING

And William Ellery Channing is one of my heroes, because he was a leading Unitarian skeptic, who is most famous for doubting, and challenging

the then generally accepted doctrine of the Trinity and the Calvinist doctrine of Human Depravity and Original Sin.

He was not always a skeptic. He was born in 1780 in Newport, Rhode Island, and was raised in an orthodox Presbyterian home. But one Sunday his father took him to hear a “famous preacher” who preached about the Calvinist vision of human depravity, of lost souls in a dark universe, in desperate need of “Sovereign grace“. When his father later pronounce it to be “sound doctrine”, young Channing was crushed. But he was jarred when his father began to whistle on the drive home. And when his father reached home and proceeded calmly to read his newspaper, the boy realized something: “No! his father did not believe it: people did not believe it! I was NOT true!

So later he entered the ministry and became a leader in the liberal religion movement and in 1819 delivered an ordination oration entitled “Unitarian Christianity”, in which he denied the doctrine of the Trinity. But this is only one of his central beliefs. He also preached about the potential for human goodness and the use of reason in religious matters. He said, “We believe that all virtue had its foundation in the moral nature of man, that is, in conscience, or his sense of duty.” In another famous ordination sermon, he preached on “Likeness to God,” in which he asserted

that humans have the potential to be like God -- a heretical belief in those days! Furthermore, he began to preach against the evils of slavery, and the evils of war. Finally, a sermon on "Self-Culture" highlighted the importance of developing ones moral, religious, intellectual, and social aspects of character.

So while he was skeptical about the Trinity, Human Depravity, slavery, and war; he did believe in the potential of human goodness, reason, and self-development. These beliefs are reflected in our responsive reading, "The Free Mind" which I recommend your re-reading sometime.

#### MY JOURNEY FROM METHODISM TO U-U SKEPTICISM

When I was about 8 years old, I went to our annual revival led by my Father, the minister. After the usual singing and sermonizing about Jesus saving us from our sins, Father was at the alter pleading for someone to come to the alter, confess his sins and be saved by Jesus Christ. Nobody responded and we sang another verse of "Just as I am without one plea." Still nobody responded. I felt so sorry for Father that I went down and confessed with tears that I was a sinner and that I would give my life to Jesus.

And I did as Chaplain of our High School and as a pre-ministerial student at Duke University. -But then a funny thing happened on the way to

becoming a Christian preacher: I took a bunch of courses in biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy -- all of which led me to doubt that there is a heaven and hell, or even an immortal soul. So I left the Methodist Youth Fellowship there and joined the Student Unitarian Association; and switched my faith in Christianity to a faith in sociology as the savior of the world. I have since become skeptical of sociology's ability to save the world, but I think it does have a better chance than does Christianity.

#### THINGS I AM SKEPTICAL ABOUT

I believe with Bergamin, a Spanish aphorist, that "A faith that does not allow room for doubt is not a faith but a superstition." -And with Bertrand Russell that "In all affairs it is a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.

So here is a list of some of the most important things I am skeptical about:

1. A personal God -- or any supernatural being.
2. An immortal soul -- or any other immortal thing (except perhaps the universe).
3. Abstinence only as a means of birth control.
4. Need for a huge military budget and 8,000 nuclear weapons.
5. Winning the war in Afghanistan with a "surge" of more troops.

6. Winning the “War on Drugs” by stiffer penalties and longer jail sentences.

## THINGS I BELIEVE IN

Francis Bacon said *If a man begins with certainties; he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to start with doubts, he will end in certainties.* I certainly began with a lot of doubts, but now have a long list of things I am fairly certain about (unless presented with contrary evidence!)

1. Evolution (I once had a moving man who tried to convince me to believe in creationism by saying that God just planted those fossils of evolving creatures to test our faith.) -And I don't accept the theory of “Intelligent Design” as an acceptable substitute for evolution by natural selection.

2. Climate change. (Don't get me started.)

3. Need for population control. I believe with the Population Connection people that without population control, most of our other causes (reducing poverty, crime, pollution, war) are hopeless.

4. Need to reduce ageism. I believe ageism is our third great “ism” after racism and sexism -- and that ageism may be doing as much damage as the other two “isms”.

5. Fitness and healthy life-styles as ways to happiness and longevity. -And I am trying to prove that “You can improve with age.”

So those are my lists of things I am skeptical about and things I believe in.

Would you like to share some of your lists?