

Forward Through the Ages

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What are your plans and hopes for yourself for the coming decade?

In the journey of life, a new decade stretches before us. No matter how far off the final horizon seems to be, it now seems that we can look back and measure off a certain distance, and look ahead that same distance. We can look back and see 2000 so far back there, and just this side of them, that awful sight of Twin Towers burning -- once they filled the sky and now they seem much smaller -- and we see the long road we have traveled since then. For me, ten years ago I had just arrived here in Worcester, a new minister, starting a second, or was it a third? or the fourth? career. Sue started her present job on January 1, 2000. Where were you?

And now we can, at least in our mind, measure off a similar length of time, and project into the future. We can peer down the long road we are traveling and see a little roadmark far ahead marked 2020. At least many of us can. For some of us, the shining ribbon of highway climbs into the mountains and slips over the far horizon before we can see any roadsign marked 2020.

But look ahead and imagine you and yours in the next 10 years. Imagine your children growing 10 years older; the babies now squirming through the service will be late into grammar school, bright and beautiful, the kids in the sixth grade class I visit will be in college or even graduates, coming back to the Christmas eve service and reconnecting with their old friends.

What will it be for you? What are your hopes? What do you want to be doing, who will you be with, what kind of person will you be? I assume that you will want to be happy, contented with your life, fulfilled, but what will make for that kind of happiness in your life?

But isn't it true that beyond what hoping for what everybody hopes for: health for yourself and the ones you love, and whatever marks a

comfortable lifestyle for you, what you hope for is a life lit by an inner light, a life that is authentic to you, driven by your purpose and best intentions, a life that is responsible to the people and the planet on which you depend, but still the life that you choose.

“The life you choose.” Did I just say that? You don’t get to choose your life – life is what happens to you while you are making other plans, the song says. (John Lennon in 1980). Not totally true.

But you do get to, indeed, you have to, choose how you respond the changing circumstances of your life. But the temptation not to choose, to drift, is strong.

This is a spiritual question: One of the my core beliefs is that the spirit is a muscle, and like all muscles it gets stronger when it is worked, and the work of the spirit is choosing. Choosing where to spend our time, choosing where to spend our money, choosing with whom we companion, choosing when to speak and when to keep silent, choosing what to eat, when to fight and when to walk away. “For everything there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven”; it is when our spirit is strong that

we will be able to know what time it is, and what is appropriate for this moment, and this is the most important part, to have the courage and self-possession to act on that knowledge.

To get through the coming decade in life, to make it to 2020 and to find ourselves in a good place, we will each have to cultivate a way of thinking and a way of being that is calm and open and tolerant and reverent and grateful.

In short, the decade calls us to cultivate what William Ellery Channing calls in our responsive reading today, “The Free Mind.”

Of all the readings in this book, and there are many wonderful ones in it, I chose this one, “the Free Mind” for the first Sunday of the first year of a new decade. Yes, it is 180 years old, (It comes from a Channing Sermon entitled “Spiritual Freedom” that was preached in 1830 – I have posted a link to the original sermon on the Church’s Facebook page) but I think that it explains as clearly as anything what Liberal Religion is calling people toward. If evangelical Christianity calls upon the people to accept

Christ as their Savior, then Liberal Religion calls upon the people to the cultivate a Free mind.

It is our call to conversion, and it is a call that to make the world at large, to our wider community, to each other in our covenanted community of the congregation, and to ourselves in the privacy of our own personal self-reflections, meditations and prayers.

In this piece, Channings calls us to free our mind of four habits of thinking that will stand in the way of living into our visions for 2020, and these are the personal tasks of transformation that Liberal Religion asks of you.

First: Free your mind from an single-minded focus on the work of survival. Yes, eating and drinking are important. I read many of your Facebook status updates and I appreciate the joy that people derive from cooking good food for one's family, for baking treats with the children. And I appreciate that none of us can ignore the necessity of work and tending to one's economic well-being and survival. If you are looking for work, a job can seem like the very gates of heaven. But we all know, and we all forget, that this realm of life is not all there is, that we are capable

of so much more, that we will not be fulfilled until we live a life in balance, what Channing calls a life of righteousness.

Second: Liberal Religion asks you to free your mind from its bondage to the past, the ideas and worldviews you have passively inherited, the mental habits, your pride over past achievements and your shame over past failures and inadequacies.

Channing and that generation of religious liberals lived and worked in an age before the psychological insights of the later 19th and 20th century. So, they tended to think that our personalities were shaped by the content of what we thought. Now, we tend to think that what we think is shaped by our personalities.

Their critique of Calvinism was that its thoughts about the ultimate depravity of humanity and predestination shaped the believer into a depressed, fatalistic and passive person. Now, we are more inclined to say that depressed, fatalistic and passive persons seek out faiths and religions that express what they already feel. And this is true, but only to

an extent; if we believed in it 100%, we would not bother to have a Sunday School, would we?

In today's more psychologically-oriented era, to free the mind is not only to put aside outworn dogma, and obsolete opinions, and antique ideologies, but also to become aware of, and to move toward overcoming, all the mental habits, compulsions, demons, and fixations that we are barely conscious of, all our stuff.

Third: Channing, and Liberal Religion and this Church (which, of course, was already 45 years old when Channing wrote *Spiritual Freedom*) charge us with the responsibility of protecting our minds from what he calls the "usurpations of society", and to break ourselves of the habit of "cowering to human opinion."

Now, none of those do that, do we? None of us would ever admit to being a follower of fad and fashion, a conformist? What would people think?

But the scapegoat instinct in the human being is very strong. And there will be a time in the next ten years when you will be in a situation when

the group you are in is uniting itself against an outsider, and you will need to stand up and disagree. Even if it is just to say, “I don’t share your prejudices” or to say, “that joke is not funny, but hateful.”

And the human instinct to “herd” is very strong. There will be a time in the next ten years when a group is huddling together, facing inward instead of outward. It could well be this congregation. A time when everyone is more focused on making each other feel safe and comfortable instead of facing the challenges of change and conflict. Will you then cower to human opinion?

And fourthly and finally, Channing, this church and Liberal Religion, and this minister call upon you to free your mind from the prejudices and stereotypes that keep you from being “open to the light whencesoever it may come and able to receive new truth as an angel from heaven.” Free your mind from all that gets in the way of your recognition in all human beings the image of God and rights of all God’s children.”

And let us look at the last words of Channing: *I call that mind free, which has cast out all fear, but that of wrongdoing, and which no menace or peril*

can enthrall: which is calm in the midst of tumult and possesses itself, though all else be lost.

The free mind possesses itself. It has self-possession, or what Rabbi Friedman calls self-differentiation. The person with a free mind knows that he or she is a different person than others. The person with a free mind has self-knowledge, and is thus able to have a balanced relationship with others. The person with the free mind is able to disagree without being an enemy. The person with a free mind can consider that another's opinion without being threatened. The person with a free mind is able to see that another person's experience may have led them to a different understanding. The person with a free mind does not see every situation as being about themselves. The marks of a free mind are calmness and playfulness and maturity.

Rabbi Friedman, a Reformed Jew and a Religious Liberal, argues that our entire culture is emotionally regressing, becoming more anxious and tense, and less able to nurture creative self-possessed individuals. He sees it in the zero-sum polarization of the political system. It's in our

reactivity: our suspicion of leaders, our willingness to make opponents and rivals into enemies, the ways that people are so easily annoyed and irritated by others, our tribalisms, and in the skittering way that we flit from one fad and obsession to another in the popular culture. Every week there is a new hate-object This week we all hate the guy who tried to blow up the plane in Detroit, (which seems a reasonable stance), but last week we all hated Tiger Woods who apparently was the only guy in the country who cheats on his wife, and before that it was that couple who crashed a White House state dinner and before that it was the guy who fooled us with boy in the bubble stunt and before that it was the woman who had the nerve to have eight kids at once. Anxious groups go looking for people to hate and berate. It's like junior high kids, who are just learning how to fit into a social group, so they are very anxious, so they pick on the kid who dresses funny. It's not good when your culture as a whole seems to be acting on the emotional level of a middle school.

We are an anxious and nervous culture moving into the new decade. The economy is worrisome and the energy and environmental situation is

worrisome. We are coming to grips with the fact that as a country we are much more diverse and much different from each other than what the majority has thought. Folks feel like their walking on eggshells more and more. We are learning that our past is not all glorious, but includes some ugly and shameful acts of bigotry and exploitation. Half of what we have always thought is out of date and we don't know which half. It's a nerve-racking world, and when people are nervous, they regress into herding and scapegoating and overreaction.

Into this confusion, into this culture, Liberal Religion issues its call to conversion. I want to say, following Channing, that Liberal Religion calls upon us to "free our minds" but that phrase sounds so hippie-dippie, wavy-gravy, so psychedelic flower-powerish. So let me say it this way:

We are saying to you, and everyone else: grow into yourself, realize the power of your own intelligence and wisdom, find the calm that comes from self-awareness, develop the playfulness that comes from taking the long view, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.