

“Touching Inward Springs”
Sermon of January 23, 2011
Rev. Tom Schade

I want to rewrite our Responsive Reading for today.

This piece by William Ellery Channing is from a piece called “The Sunday School.” It is probably from around 1830, and it identifies one of the characteristic features of Liberal Religion, over 175 years ago.

“Never forget the child is a rational moral free being and that the great end of education is awakening rational and moral energy in him and to lead him to the free choice of the right and to the free determination himself to truth and duty. The child not a piece of wax to be molded at another's pleasure nor a stone to be hewn passively into any shape which the caprice and interest of others may dictate but a living thinking being.”

Religious Education is the empowerment and liberation of the souls of children. In fact, by most traditional definitions, it is not “education” at all.

If you think of “education” as someone called a “teacher” imparting a certain amount of “information” or “Knowledge” to another, called a “student”, as long as 175 years ago, some of our ministers were rejecting this model.

In the current era, we call what we are trying to do with children and youth as “faith development” or “faith formation”. Helping people to awaken their moral energy is a ministry. It’s encouraging them. It’s coaching them. It’s inspiring them. It’s challenging them. Yes, there is some teaching involved, but it is so much more than the teaching. You will hear more about their work next week at the Annual Meeting.

But I don’t want to talk about that this morning. Or even about any sort of First Unitarian Church business.

I want to start by talking about being a good spiritual influence on the people around you.

Let me start by re-phrasing our Responsive Reading from this morning: Channing’s words.

I am going to take it a way the adult-children frame that Channing is in. He is talking about the Church and The Sunday School – adults and children – a hierarchical relationship. And, I am going to update to a more modern and current style.

So listen to this:

If you want to be a good spiritual influence on your friends, you do not want to get them to think like you do, but to think on their own; not to get them look at everything the way you do, but to let them see for themselves, not to teach them, but to inspire them to learn; not to make them do as you think they should, but to touch inward springs; not to memorize facts, but think

clearly; not to get them to go to your church or tell them how to live, but to awaken their consciences. In a word, your goal is to awaken their souls.

The way that we want to be with children is the way we also want to be with adults. Encouraging people to think for themselves, inspiring them to learn, awakening their souls.

Turn this around: what do you want from your friends? What kind of friends are you looking for? I would think that you want friends, that you NEED friends, who are honest with you, who call you out when you've been a jerk, who support your best self. I want a friend that pushes me toward my highest and best goals, who tells me not to settle for less and who reminds me of the beauty I am overlooking.

You deserve such friends, and I hope you have them, and you may even have some you have not recognized.

You need friends who do not berate you, or humiliate you, or tell you that everything you will try to do will fail. You do not need friends who tell you the only way you will amount to anything is give them authority over your life: obey, submit and conform.

This is just common sense.

And if you want that kind of friends, then you have to be that kind of friend, and that goes for everyone who you befriend, whether adult or child or somewhere in between.

That is just the golden rule of reciprocity.

Now, we started with Channing about Religious Education. And he preached that Religious Education is not about teaching and education really, but about awakening the souls of children.

But when we thought about that, we came to the conclusion that what we saw as our best way of being with children really was the best way as being with adults, our adult friends.

Where we are coming to is an answer to this question: how should we live in the world, as Religious Liberals? What is our mission together expressed in personal terms? Should we be going to demonstrations every week end for social justice causes? Should we be giving away all our money? Should we be reading good books? Eating organic food? Listening to classical music; or driving Priuses.

I suggest that while all of these things, and many more, are good things to do, they do not rise to the level of being the personal expression of our mission together.

I believe that our mission expressed in personal terms to be a source for spiritual encouragement for the people around us – So listen to this:

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but to let them see for themselves, not to teach them, but to inspire them to learn; not to make them do as you think they should, but to touch inward springs; not to memorize facts, but think clearly; not to get them to go to your church or tell them how to live, but to awaken their consciences. In a word, your goal is to awaken their souls.

Our presence in the world ought to be that friend who urges others to look into their own self and to discover what they are purposed to do, what they have been called to do, and what they are compelled to believe.

How many friends do you have that have trouble finding their voice? You can encourage them to tell the truth that they see?

How many friends do you have that have big dreams but are too afraid to try for them? How many friends do you have that do not trust their own experience, or who blame themselves for everything that goes on?

How many friends who seem to go along with the crowd, against their own better judgment?

These are people who need you to encourage them to awaken their own conscience.

They are people who need for you to encourage them to “touch their own inward springs.”

“Inward Springs” What are “inward springs?” What does Channing mean by that phrase? It is the central metaphor of his whole piece. Water bubbles up from the ground, not water that flows from a higher ground and has pooled. If you see a lake or pond – is that water that comes from a stream or a river, a temporary pooling of it as it travels from place. Or is it a Spring Fed Pond, water that has bubbled up from below? Our “inward springs” are the source of personal authenticity.

I have been thinking about these personal springs. I think that there are a few that can be named.

One is your sense of purpose. The most popular book in the United States for quite a while has been Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*. And his thesis is that every person has an ultimate purpose given by God, assigned by God. It is a passion and a project. It is a role. It may be a kind of career, or it may be to embody some virtue. It is perhaps to be brave and protect the weak and the innocent, or it may be push back the frontiers of knowledge, or to make music, or to make people laugh, or embody compassion and care. It may be to serve one desperately sick person. It may be to be a mother or a parent.

God does not announce your purpose to you; you must discern it yourself. But the knowledge of that purpose bubbles up with you from an inward spring. It does not flow down from above but bubbles up from below. We should be the people who encourage other people to touch that inward spring.

There are things that you know that few other people know. Other people may have heard that news, but you know it through your own experience.

I know that some young adults are desperately aching for a purpose, a great cause, and that they are eager to obliterate themselves in something bigger and I know that sometimes being “willing to die for a cause” comes from not yet learning how to live. I know that not because I read it in some psychology book. Or even from reading Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, but because I lived it.

And I know how sweet life can be once you accept the grace of the world, even though it is doubtful that you deserve it, and certain that people who deserve more receive it less. This strange truth, that a joyful life is possible amidst much misery, I know because I have lived it; and that knowledge bubbles up from an inward spring within me.

There is an inward spring of our own hard-won truth. We ought to be people who ask the question; Seriously?

There are other inward springs. An old minister colleague told me once that he hated all forms of moral relativism. One of his jobs was to uphold the difference between right and wrong. He would not be fooled that everybody has what they think is a good reason for whatever they do. People who are unfaithful to their spouse should be spanked and sent to bed without their supper. They should be shamed. But he also confessed to me that when those people sat in his office an inward spring of compassion kept bubbling up within him. He would feel for them and his harshness would fade.

These three inward springs are not the whole list: that passion, those hard-won truths, even the inexhaustible springs of compassion and love that bubble to the surface from the love we have received – they are matched by others in other people.

We are religious liberals and somewhere deep within us is the conviction that grace and the fullness of life and faith are at the end of the path self-realization and self-possession. Salvation and redemption will come through feeling what you authentically and really feel, and loving what you actually and spontaneously love, and knowing what you have really learned through your own life’s journey. It is not self-denial that saves us, self-mortification and self-sacrifice, self-surrender. No, it is being true to the self, following that twisty path into the future.

Because we have this belief, we are called to be a different kind of friend, and parent, and colleague and citizen. It is to listen deeply for the deep passion that lives within all, it is ask what people really believe, to ask in all serious when confronted with someone’s passion, “tell what you really feel’ -- it is to encourage deep feeling and even foolish feeling if it is authentic.

To touch inward springs. It is our gift and our ministry to encourage it. Be not afraid, for we believe that that still small voice of God does dwell within each and every one of us.

Let us listen to it.

O, good and gracious God of many names, and lies beyond all our naming, let us hear your voice as it sounds within our own thoughts and words. Make us sensitive to the inner workings of those around us, empathetic to their secret struggles and private passions. Let us

regard with reverence the inward springs within them, and honest, loving and humble friends who serve their search for fulfillment and redemption.

Amen

The key phrase is “Touch Inward Springs”. Our souls wake up as we “touch inward springs.”