

“Lineage”

A Sermon delivered by Reverend Marlin Lavanhar
at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, on Sunday, May 3, 2009

Every person wants to know before dying, that he or she has passed something of value on to someone else. Imagine coming to the end of your life, and wondering if you have touched another person's life in a way that handed on to them a valuable legacy. And I am not talking about money, or jewelry, or property, but something of real intrinsic value. In the past month All Souls has dedicated six infants and children. In that time, three more babies have been born into our church. Last week, 23 of our youth came of age and took on the full responsibilities of this faith. The question arises: “What are we passing on to them?”

There are three primary streams from which the river of All Souls is fed. Our lineage has three main sources. First and foremost is *Christianity*. This church is an outgrowth of over 2000 years of Christianity and its heritage can be traced back to the religion of those who have followed Jesus since the First Century in the ancient near East. The second stream is *The Enlightenment*. The Enlightenment in Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries brought reason back into the forefront of human knowledge, pulling Europe, and much of Christianity, out of the Dark Ages, during which Christians were burning books, burning each other, and denying scientific truth. The third is *Transcendentalism*. Transcendentalism, a movement of the early Nineteenth Century, began as a protest against the general state of society for its unthinking conformity, and urged that each individual find, in Ralph Waldo Emerson's words, “an original relation to the universe” rather than follow the doctrines of established religions.

So, the three main streams of thought and tradition that flow into the river of All Souls are Christianity, the Enlightenment and Transcendentalism: Christianity referring to our foundation in the religion of Jesus and the Bible, The Enlightenment referring to our trust in reason, and Transcendentalism referring to a trust in intuition and personal experience. These are three very different ways of knowing. The first comes from tradition, the second comes from logic, and the third comes from experience. If you have ever been in a religious debate with someone (and if you live in Oklahoma you have been in a religious debate with someone!) you can usually tell which one of these ways of knowing they consider primary. When a person says, “but it says it in the Bible, therefore it must be true,” the person is relying on tradition. When a person says, “I don't believe anything if it cannot be proven,” that person is relying primarily on logic and rationality. When a person says, “It doesn't matter to me whether it is in the Bible, or if it can be proven

logically, because I have experienced it and I know in my heart that it is true.” That person knows from experience, and is, in essence, a transcendentalist.

Transcendentalism teaches that there is a way to discover the truth that transcends both reason and the Bible (or both reason and tradition). Early Transcendentalists believed that beyond all of the specific religions there is a universal truth that can be discovered and experienced directly. They believed religion to be a road map that can guide people toward Truth and God. But they saw that too many people’s religion focused on the map over the destination. There’s a Buddhist saying: *Do not mistake the finger that points to the moon for the moon itself*. What Buddha meant, is that when people choose to follow religious teachings, teachers, rites and rituals, they should not confuse the symbols or signs with the message or the meaning. In fact, the Buddha taught that once people reach Enlightenment they will realize that all of the scriptures and symbols do not really matter anymore. Once they reach Enlightenment, they realize that these things are simply vehicles to take them to a higher consciousness and connect them to Ultimate Reality.

This point was driven home to me when I was in India studying Hinduism. One day, my teacher showed us a beautiful movie about a young lady who loved Lord Krishna. She followed the path of devotion and spent her life worshipping and praising her Lord. Everyday she would bring fresh flowers to his altar and she would dance ecstatically to express her love for her Lord. She danced and worshipped Lord Krishna for years and years until one day she reached *Samadhi* (or Enlightenment.) In that moment she realized that she was one with everything and Lord Krishna, with whom she had just been dancing, disappeared. She realized that her Lord was part of her and she was part of her Lord. The separation disappeared – and all existence became united as one.

My teacher, Swami Dharmanada, explained that once she attained the higher state of consciousness she realized that what she had imagined as Lord Krishna was not really God, but was simply a beautiful image she had of God that allowed her to express her love and devotion so that she could arrive at a higher consciousness. In that higher state of consciousness, she transcended the images and symbols that were so real and powerful to her before. Dharmanada explained further: it was not that the woman’s love for her Lord was not real, but that it is difficult (maybe impossible) to love and worship the abstract idea of the Oneness of all creation. It is hard to love a mystery beyond our understanding. He also explained that eventually we all must transcend the tools that we use to raise our consciousness.

I can remember being in art history class and learning that the image that most of us have of Jesus, with his gorgeous long hair and his pale European complexion, began from a particular

European artist in the Fifteenth Century, Albrecht Durer. Anthropologists today explain that Jesus must have had a much darker complexion and much curlier hair, as did the Jewish people of Jesus' day and region. Some even say he was black. He was certainly brown. But he was definitely *not white*. Nevertheless, people all over the world have fallen in love with a Jesus who looks like a French hippie. (One who uses apparently really expensive hair conditioner.) And you know what? It doesn't really matter. Unless, of course, it leads a person to think that God is a white man, and *especially* if it makes a person think that white people are superior to others. But generally, his name, his image, and even the stories we know about Jesus, are merely vehicles that are meant to help people discover a truth that is bigger than any image, or name, or story we can imagine.

The Bible, and other scriptures, can point us toward the ultimate good or God, but we should not trap God in any book or race or gender or religion. Because God is not a Christian. ...Or a Muslim, a Mormon or Methodist. God is not Buddhist, Baha'i or Brethren. Neither is God Hindu or UU. God's name is not Jehovah or Jesus, Allah or Adonai, Buddha or Brahma. All of these are human names for a mystery that transcends all these names. Another way to say it is that these are all names of God, but anyone who believes that he or she knows the one and only name, or the one and only symbol, or the one and only scripture, is doing what the Buddhists call "mistaking the finger for the moon."

Names like Jesus, Jehovah, Allah, Krishna and God help us refer to the transcendent mystery that is at the center of life and death, but we should not get stuck upon, or argue over, which word we use to refer to the Ultimate Reality. Just think about how in the English language we call water *water*, or H_2O . In Spanish they call water *agua*; in Japanese it's called *Mizu*. They are all referring to the same reality, they just use different words.

The main stream of thought that we are wading through today is our transcendentalist lineage. That is because our theme for the month of May is Transcendence. But I also want to make it clear that if All Souls were a plant, Christianity is the soil in which this church and its roots are planted. If it were not for Christianity, and the Bible, this church would not be here today. That is why, in this church, we teach that we can learn from all of the world's religions and cultures, of course, but the Bible is still our foundational scripture. We have a special relationship with the Bible, and with Christian history and Christian liturgy and Christian music. To forget this, or to deny it, is to mistake the very foundation and lineage of this church. And as it is said, "If you don't know where you come from, you won't know where you're going."

That said, the Enlightenment thinking and thinkers have shaped the way we read and interpret the Bible, and the way we understand truth and knowledge. For at least the first three

centuries of our faith's history, beginning in the Protestant Reformation, our religious forbearers were highly rational Christians who believed that the Bible was the one and only revelation of God. They taught that the way to discover God and truth was to read and interpret the Bible using reason.

However, in the Nineteenth Century, Unitarian ministers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker said that there is something that transcends this Biblical rationalism. They said that Truth can be discovered outside of the Bible, and that it can be discovered through experience and intuition rather than just through reason. Now you have to understand that this was radical and heretical talk even for Unitarians of the time. The Unitarian establishment of that time said, "Absolutely not! We are Christian and the Bible is the sole revelation of God, and reason is the only faithful tool to use to understand the truth!" Conflict raged throughout the denomination for decades, until cool heads prevailed and they decided that there was enough room in our churches for both Christians *and* Transcendentalists.

Today there are still many Unitarian and Universalist churches (most of them in New England) that are specifically Christian. That means that they follow the Christian liturgical calendar, sing Christian hymns, and use the Bible as their scripture for readings and education. In these churches, they teach that all religions have validity, but they believe that they are meant to walk the path of Christianity and to follow the teachings of Jesus specifically. All of our churches in Hungary and Romania, including our partner church in Enlaka, are also specifically Christian, as are our churches in India, Pakistan and the Philippines. A number of our churches in England, Scotland and Wales continue to identify as Christian, and I believe the church that has just become our new partner church in Kompala, Uganda also identifies as UU Christian. (I still have a lot to learn about them; hopefully Rev. Mark Kiyimba will get a visa and be able to come speak to us this summer.)

We should remember that All Souls in Tulsa began as more of a UU Christian church. For example, this church recited the Lord's Prayer, in unison, every Sunday until the 1960s. This church was also one of the last churches in our association to change to the current hymnal which is our most eclectic hymnal. It was only eight years ago, under an interim Senior Minister, that this church switched from the 1964 hymnal which is dominated by Christian hymns of praise and worship.

However, this church has also always endeavored to drink from all the streams of our heritage: Christianity, the Enlightenment and Transcendentalism. Needless to say, individuals in the church may fill their cup a bit more from one or the other streams. There are some who are more Christian in their orientation than others. There are those who are more influenced by the

Enlightenment traditions of Humanism and science and prefer logical proof to be at the core of their understanding. And there are others whose spirituality tends to lean more toward Transcendentalism, in that they take a more mystical or spiritual approach to religion, many being influenced by eastern religious traditions and practices. As a church, All Souls strives to make ample room for all, and I think we do a pretty good job. We have Bible study for those who want to explore the Bible and that part of our heritage. We have various programs and speakers that appeal to the Enlightenment thinkers such as recent programs on topics like nanotechnology and church-state separation, programs on Abraham Lincoln, evolution, and various political and intellectual forums. And for the Transcendentalists we have yoga classes, Tai Chi and meditation on Wednesday nights, world religion classes on Sunday mornings and other opportunities to cultivate experiential learning and first-hand approaches to God and spirit and truth.

But probably the most unexpected transcendentalist opportunity to be offered at All Souls has come through our new contemporary service. For those who are new to the church, it has only been since September that we have had this kind of contemporary service. The inclusion of Pastor David Smith and the New Dimensions Chorale has brought us a style of music that – just like this robe, and pulpit, and those pews, and that organ, and our architecture, and our liturgy and order of service and the majority of the hymns in our hymnal – originates from the Christian tradition. But, the praise style of singing is Transcendentalist!

Here's why: praise singing, for those who appreciate it, cultivates an experience of the spirit. That is what Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists were seeking and finding and teaching. They said that there is a way of having a direct experience of the spirit that transcends reason and intellect and scripture. You may know the old joke about Unitarians that says: If given a choice between going to heaven or going to a discussion about heaven, most Unitarians would go to the discussion. Well, Emerson, Thoreau, and their generation, said that they want to *experience* heaven not just discuss it. They wanted to *experience* God, not just hear sermons about how other people in the past experienced God. Let me be clear, they were scholars of the Bible, most of whom went to Harvard. They appreciated the Bible and were among the smartest minds of their generation. But they felt that religion had become too much about reading and talking about how other people, hundreds of years ago, had experienced incarnation and miracles. And they thought that religion needed to be about more than rehashing second-hand stories about other people's encounters with God and spirit. They thought religion had to be about us having our own direct experiences of God and spirit in *our* time and in *our* lives.

The Transcendentalists were convinced that religion is not meant to focus on some ancient times when God and prophets walked the earth, but rather that it is all right here, right now! Truth, Revelation, Heaven, Hell, Salvation, God, Enlightenment, Wholeness, Jerusalem, Mecca, The Mountain Top, Calvary, Peace, the Kingdom of God, Eternity... are *all* right here, right now! *Pay attention!* They said. *Wake up! Be here, now!* The wonders you are waiting for are right here, right now. Stop living in the past, or living for the future. Eternity is not so much an expanse of time; it is a *quality* of time. Eternity exists in every moment, including this one.

Have you ever felt like time has stopped? Have you ever been at a birth or with someone when they died? Or listened to a piece of music or made music, and it felt like an eternal moment? Eternity is not a length of time; it is a quality of time. Jerusalem is not so much a holy land somewhere far away, as it is any place where humanity and the Holy meet. Our task is not to take a pilgrimage to the holy land at some point in our lives. Our task is to make wherever we are a holy land.

The religion we are handing to our children and to the world is one that says, "It's all right here." It is a religion that learns from many eras and many prophets, but is a religion that is focused on today! We are not waiting for a time to come in the future. We are not waiting for another life to come. Our religion is right here, right now.

It is all right here, and the streams that feed this faith all merge into one river which leads to the same ocean. There are three primary streams, but many tributaries. Whether it begins from a rain drop falling from the sky, or the steam rising off the pavement after a hot summer downpour. Whether it is the sweat rolling down the back of a child slave in Asia, or pouring off the brow of the men rehabbing homes for the poor here in Tulsa. Whether it is the tear dripping quickly down a child's smooth cheek, or the tear rambling over the ridges of an elder's face, all of the waters of life, by whatever name, are flowing to the same ocean.

May we never mistake the river for the ocean itself. But may we know deep down that the river leads to the ocean, and they and we are all one. That's our lineage. From India to Africa to Enlaka to America. From *New* England to *old* England. From Galilee to Hungary to Tennessee. It's all right here.

That's our lineage.

Pass it on.