

# A CANDLE IS FOR BURNING



- *The final sermon.* -

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon

Preached at Unity Church of North Easton

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**I**t's hard to believe the year is over. It's been an eventful year, and what the future's going to be is yet to be decided. You know that. The future of this place is really yours to make. A great vision will make it great. Mere busyness won't.

What a year. We faced a serious budget crisis that is the culmination of years of expenses outrunning income so that the bank accounts held appallingly little, and for all the splendor of the buildings, there is no endowment fund for the congregation itself and its operations. Now your vital religious education program for children and youth will be without a Director, and you have undertaken the daunting task of organizing an entirely lay-run program.

There have been great achievements, because here is a congregation of spectacular people whose care for this entity called Unity Church is very great.

You'd looked at this treasure of a building and resolved to restore it, and the progress to now is pretty spectacular. The glorious medley of cultures at your UCAN graduation gave witness to a pretty remarkable outreach. And the work of caring and teaching and worshipping went on while you searched for and found a terrific new minister. Now you'll have to discover what her best gifts are and work out ways to make the most of those gifts. If you welcome her as warmly as you welcomed me, you'll be off to a fine start.

But Unity Church remains on a membership and attendance plateau where it's been as long as anybody can remember, and as I studied the figures and historical records, it doesn't look to me as though it ever has quite gotten to critical mass. Long ago Unity Church could be content to be small and almost exclusive but it's a new day and it exists within a new community. People have been passing this place and barely seeing it, barely conscious of what you're about.

Famous building, sure. I remember a friend who used to attend Dignity's gay Catholic masses that rented the

## THE READINGS

*Emerson, 1862:*

Never was anyone too strong for his proper work. Art is long, and life short, and we must supply this disproportion, by borrowing and applying to our task the energies of Nature.

The forces are infinite. Every one has the might of all; for that is the secret of the world . . . But if you wish to avail yourself of their might, . . . you must take their divine direction, not they yours. Obedience alone gives the right to command. . . . All that the world admires comes from within. . . . We are as we believe. We are as we think. A certain quantity of power belongs to a certain quantity of truth.

Fear disenchant life and the world. . . . I admire the sentiment of Thoreau who said, "Nothing is so much to be feared as fear; God himself likes atheism better." For the world is a battle ground; . . . and the most quiet and protected life is at any moment exposed to incidents which test your firmness.

Besides, what we do and suffer is in moments, but the cause of right for which we labor, never dies, . . . gains by our defeats, and will know how to compensate our extremest sacrifice. . . . My point is, that the movement of the whole machine, the motive force of life, and of every particular life, is moral. The world stands on our thoughts, and not on iron or cotton; and the iron of iron, the fire of fire, the ether and source of all the elements, is moral force.

—"Perpetual Forces," *Later Lectures of RWE*, II, 287

*Continued* 🗨️

Hunnewell Chapel at Arlington Street Church in Boston. Its congregation wasn't as big then. I was talking with him about Unitarian Universalism and invited him to visit on a Sunday and he said, to my utter astonishment:

*there are services here? I thought it was a museum!*

We thought *everybody* knew all about Arlington Street Church. Because that's what you always think from the *inside*.

It will be a necessary challenge to get the people *outside* your doors thinking of you differently — *to get people thinking of you at all!* It will take imaginative publicity and outreach and advertising and better signage. Because for a lot of people, Unity Church is one of those things they never really see: just as you often don't really see the familiar stuff that surrounds you. Sometimes I'll be looking, looking for something and it's in that pile of books right in front of me that I don't see anymore. I just don't notice it even when it's right in front of me. That's Unity Church in the unseeing eyes and unsuspecting minds of townsfolk. If they only knew!

But that will take signage that gets their attention, that sports fetching sermon-titles, that tells them there's actually somewhere to park. And, of course, it will take somewhere to park, to go with the sign. It will take advertising, getting your message out there. Your future depends on these things.

And that takes vision and a sense of urgency, a creative impulse.

Emerson talked about the people who gathered in his parlour, who filled his lecture halls, who thronged to hear Theodore Parker, who, in the 19th century, revolutionized religion in this country and put a stop to slavery and changed so many people's imaginations about the place of women in society. He used the image of a flame of fire. This is what he said:

The tongue of flame is the most affecting symbol of what we should be. A spark of fire is the sign of the robust, united, burning, radiant soul. By the same fire, vital, consecrating, celestial, which burns until it shall dissolve all things into the waves and surges of an ocean of light, we see and know each other, and what spirit each is of.

A candle is for burning.



Sure, the challenges are great. Sure, creation isn't finished and we are faced with deep and urgent crises:

§ a climate emergency

§ Zimbabwean dissidents tortured and murdered and the world does nothing while the desperation and hunger deepens

§ lying governments like our own taking us into crazy wars

§ the eroding of civil liberties and other fundamental values in our country

§ disease, suffering, hunger, superstition and ignorance

*William Ellery  
Channing,  
1829:*

He *had too much* the wisdom of *experience*. He *wanted* what may be called the *wisdom of hope*. . . . There are seasons in human affairs, of inward and outward revolution, when new depths seem to be broken up in the soul, when new wants are unfolded in multitudes, and a new and undefined good is thirsted for. These are periods when the principles of experience need to be modified, when hope and trust and instinct claim a share with prudence in the guidance of affairs, when, in truth, **to dare** is the highest wisdom.

—William Ellery Channing,  
"The Union," 1829

*Ralph Waldo  
Emerson: GET  
2nd SOURCE*

The tongue of flame is the most affecting symbol of what we should be. A spark of fire is the sign of the robust, united, burning, radiant soul. By the same fire, vital, consecrating, celestial, which burns until it shall dissolve all things into the waves and surges of an ocean of light, we see and know each other, and what spirit each is of.

*from Over-Soul*

That is true. It's all true. We can list our own problems closer to home.

But the unbounded human possibility that might and must be brought to bear on these challenges seem to be otherwise occupied or, more likely, undiscovered, or shackled. We've got to begin with a spiritual revolution. I don't think Unitarian Universalists understand this, *but that is what we are in this world to do.*

Suppose, for a moment, such a revolution breaks out among us. Suppose we learn to awaken to a deeper and truer part of ourselves than that outer rim of ourselves from which we've all learned over our entire lifetimes to live — enter that primordial place from which our lives and the life of the world came and continue to flow and evolve —

If we will do that, we will know that we've come home to our truest, most powerful selves, that we never were far from home, and that at the very depths of us nothing is wrong, and no matter what storms howl around us — and that we're up to the task.

You'll come at whatever confronts you from a place of health and strength. You'll come from an inner place beyond the tumult, a more essential self that has never been hurt or disappointed or afraid, and you'll face the challenges of this new day with confidence.

And if, having entered that transcendent realm of the spirit, that truest and best part of ourselves, *we then come back into this real and concrete world*, come back into it from that deep and radiant place — you won't be a despairing presence, a cynical presence, saying "What's the use?" —

Instead you will be a ceaselessly creative force continuing the work of creation. You will be evolution itself aware of itself and you will be the Universe aware of its own unfolding — in every moment, in every challenge, however humble, however great and daunting.

See yourselves as a community of spirit holding each other to this evolutionary path — right here in a world that is in crisis, deep

crisis in the midst of its own unfolding — and right here, part of this world, you will be a creative element, a living awareness of this world's unfolding splendor —

and then — where *you* meet the *world* — there will be

ignition

combustion, you will have incandescence —

and a candle is for burning.

Sometimes we think — we have been conditioned to think, haven't we? — that the ideal life would be unending days on a beach somewhere in a chaise lounge-chair with a gin & tonic and a novel — a *light* novel, not too complex.

Which can be fun for a few days (sometimes we need it) but *that*, ultimately, wouldn't satisfy you because a candle is for burning.



And spiritual depth — what great spiritual teachers of all times and places have spoken of — *spiritual depth is for trying times, and trying times are for spiritual depth.*

There is a spiritual shallowness, a superficiality about these times — and I think it has to do with the ease and comfort we have enjoyed. We have not faced very much adversity. There are always the personal struggles and reversals. But we have lived in a relatively free country and we have not yet lived with very much of the certain consequences of our mistreatment of the natural world. Not until now. But that is changing fast.

Now it's perfectly clear that a new humanity must arise. We have to be the new humanity. The great creative Energy that brought forth life and consciousness is not finished.



Aurobindo — the great Indian independence figure just before Gandhi appeared on the scene, and then spiritual explorer, philosopher, poet — Aurobindo discovered this. He awakened to the situation in his native India. He knew something had to change. And he

turned to the profound depths of his native Hindu religious tradition, which, in turn, sent him directly to his own inner resources, which are one with the Great Energy that is the life of all this Universe.

He found at the core of him an inner silence, and came to love it, sometimes tremble before what it would ask of him, and out of it his words and his deeds came.

It won't come automatically just because you hang out with other people who understand this and value it, but it sure helps to live within a community that aspires to this kind of consciousness, and supports it when it shows up. We need each other for that.

And so there was Aurobindo facing impossible odds, the weight of overwhelming oppression. He himself was in constant danger. And just then he wrote of a heart released from grief, an experience "beyond [mere] belief," and

*A Peace stupendous, featureless, still,  
Replaces all . . .  
A silent unnamed emptiness content  
Either to fade in the Unknowable  
Or thrill with the luminous seas of  
the Infinite.*

How is it that a person who decides there's more purpose to his life than just living his own life in peace, who has instead thrown himself into the epic struggle, can speak of a *heart released from grief*? Can speak of a *peace stupendous*, of a *thrill* about his day-to-day existence?

A bit of a paradox — yes, the world is a mess, headed for hell in a handbasket — and it's up to us to change it, to make a new future. We look at a colossal problem from an inner place, in us, where there *is no problem*, where we are whole, and strong.

My father taught me to be a truly accomplished worrier. But the news is that at the deepest level of us nothing is wrong, not

where our truest, most authentic selves are. For our egoic lives, oh yeh, it's a mess, alright. But Aurobindo didn't live there, have his being there. And that's stupendously good news that's stupendously at odds with what we've come to assume, living in a shallower part of ourselves, living from an outer rim of ourselves instead of the core. Hey — I'm preaching to myself, too.

I sometimes forget. We've spent lifetimes being taught to forget.

That is where we will find peace, release from grief, the thrill of life: in the midst of the struggle, buoyed up by a Spirit, carried along by purposes greater than our own, something worth living for and even dying for. So we face adversity today.

But beyond and behind the adversity there is something More.



We know the present situation.

*It's up to us.*

Do you want to sit this out? We can't sit this out.

You and I are a vanguard. This faith of ours is a vanguard of a new mind, a new consciousness.

I believe there is only one way to enter this fray effectively, and retain our inner peace and the joy of life. It's a deeply spiritual route. This is why we gather. And along the way we enjoy, we're enriched by, some spectacular company, a wonderful community — but without this journey, without this calling, this community has no depth or meaning and will soon wear thin.

If what you want, instead, is to be that creative force, that burning candle, then a few things are required.

Serious spiritual practice as a given among you, supported and shared among you

A serious commitment to be, together, that burning, radiant light — for this community of people to be a context for the fullest and highest and deepest development of human

possibility,  
not a mere collection of egos  
but a communion of evolved and evolving  
hearts and minds living beyond ego  
to be a gathering of unfolding and deeply  
committed giftedness gathered and working  
together for high and noble purposes,  
And yes, an *organization*, too, an effective  
organization that never mistakes the plumbing  
for the water —

that expects to be a force for change and  
doesn't mind igniting a little fire here and  
there, being an irritant to the powers that be  
and to the worst human impulses.

If that is what you want, I guarantee you  
absolutely, that is what you will be — if you  
want it more than anything else.

But if you try to take up the work of saving  
this planet from the worst that humans can do  
and be, save it from the climate catastrophe  
that we are headed for —

If you try to instill in the young and instill  
in this culture higher values, a nobler vision of  
justice and peace and the fulfilling of human  
possibility —

If you realize it's really up to us —

But you don't first find your way beyond  
ego to that stillness, that pure creative im-  
pulse, that deeper identity, the most real and

authentic identity at the core of you — and  
unearth it, and evolve it, and free it, through  
concentrated spiritual practice, through the  
cultivation of a culture of higher values —

You will be overwhelmed by the problems  
of the world  
and depressed  
and you will throw up your hands in futility  
and despair.



But a candle is for burning. So lay hold of who  
and what you really are, don't be afraid of it,  
insist on it in every moment.

Understand that the world of spirit and the  
daily world of form are not two different  
things, that spirit created the world and cre-  
ates it still and will go on creating it from right  
here, from the interior of the world, from the  
interior of yourselves, and you are its eyes and  
hands and manifest presence, *conscious*, this  
unfolding universe aware of itself.

Now that kind of perspective will make  
your worship electric  
will bring to your doors seekers who  
belong here  
will make you not just a fact  
but a factor.

But remember — it asks not less than every-  
thing. Dear friends — farewell.

## MEDITATION & SILENCE

I want to invite you once again, and maybe with a difference, maybe not. But for these remaining minutes, I ask you to do just three things:

Be still. Being still is a metaphor for wanting to be free.

Be at ease, relax. Ease of being is a metaphor for letting everything go, letting everything be as it is.

And pay attention — don't engage the thoughts or feelings that come, just pay attention, as if witnessing it all from someplace way beyond the surface.



Come to this [unbounded] place before you were ever hurt, ever defeated, ever frightened;

before you ever won or lost, ever were disappointed or exulted,

before ever you were poisoned with flattery or humiliation

Before you crossed the threshold from infinite unmanifested potentiality

And turned down the stream of time

to try, to struggle, to want, to hope and do and feel

Come to this place

Before your first hope was truncated and made small

Before walls falsified the horizon

Before you could not see the Goal and began to choose between substitutes.

From this place — we shall go forth to renew the world,

create the world that will be.

- SILENCE -