



CHANNING: THE POWER OF ONE SUBLIME IDEA

For the birthday of
William Ellery Channing
1780-1842

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon
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Before William Ellery Channing — who was born 228 years ago last Monday — one disastrous idea dominated religion and with it the whole culture: Human beings are miserable fallen creatures, depraved, incapable of any good at all. You're a complete mess. Furthermore, God, who is somebody *out-there* somewhere wholly separate from miserable humans, has determined everything in advance, has a reason for everything. So if some are poor or homeless, or live in slavery, well, it's none of our business to interfere, that's just the way God wants it. Don't even ask why.

And you know this idea held a particularly strong foothold in Puritan New England but it isn't gone. You can still hear it this morning in countless pulpits.

It lies at the root of the cynicism that governs so much of what is happening right now.

It was formulated into doctrine most clearly by John Calvin, in the 1500s. I know something about this: I have a degree from an evangelical Calvinist seminary, but more about that next week.

Are we really that bad? Judging by the state of the world these days you could be forgiven for concluding that we are. Who are we? What are we?



You may know that it was William Ellery Channing who really defined Unitarianism, in a sermon in 1819 in Baltimore. But nine years later he shocked the religious world again with one called "Likeness to God." Now understand what it was to

THE READING

*William Ellery
Channing,
Likeness to God
(1828)*

True religion consists in . . . making us more and more partakers of the Divinity. . . . The likeness to God, of which I propose to speak, belongs to man's higher or spiritual nature. It has its foundation in the original and essential capacities of the mind. . . .

Whence do we derive our knowledge of the attributes and perfections which constitute the Supreme Being? I answer, we derive them from our own souls. The divine attributes are first developed in ourselves, and thence transferred to our Creator. The idea of God, sublime and awful {awesome} as it is, is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity. . . .

That unbounded spiritual energy which we call God, is conceived by us only through consciousness, through the knowledge of ourselves. . . . The Infinite Light would be for ever hidden from us, did not kindred rays dawn and brighten within us.

. . . The effects and signs of [divine] power, wisdom, and goodness are apparent through the whole creation. But apparent to what? Not to the outward eye; not to the acutest organs of sense; but to a kindred mind . . . In truth, the

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say, in New England in the 1820s, drenched, *marinated*, in Calvinism, that you and I have “a kindred nature to God.”

And he went on to spell out the chief aim of religion: to cultivate that higher, divine self which bears a likeness to God.

Who are we, anyway? and what?

Channing found his way to a different answer than his Calvinist roots ever taught him.



Who was he? He began as we all do as a product of his culture.

And this giant in our spiritual story: When he was smothered in scarfs and cloaks against the Boston wind, Channing was a five foot tall, 100-pound invalid.

He'd grown up in Newport, Rhode Island, where the family belonged to a church that featured hell-fire and damnation preaching. His mother owned slaves.

He entered Harvard when he was 14, and was graduated at 18. He got a job as a tutor in Virginia and spent a year and a half among Southerners who had grown rich because of the labor of slaves. He was so repulsed by their ill-gotten wealth that he refused to spend any money there and withdrew into an ascetic isolation, reading and studying and getting very little food or sleep, permanently damaging his health.

He returned to Harvard as a theological student and in 1802 was interviewed by the Cambridge Association of Ministers. Somehow he got through the interview without their figuring out that he didn't believe in the Trinity and other planks of Calvinism. In 1803, at 23, he was called to be minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, which, after his death, moved to the corner of Arlington and Boylston Streets in 1859 and became Arlington Street Church. You can see his monument across Arlington street.

This was New England, that still remembered the Great Awakening, a revival movement that was a new variation of Calvinism, that revival that had seen Jonathan Edwards preach his dread-inspiring “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

Others had begun to question Calvinism. But no one would upset the religious world like Channing. His voice can almost still be heard on those streets if you listen hard enough.



But in the 1820s and 30s he was troubled and genuinely torn. The culture in which he lived took slavery as normal, just the way things are. And it didn't have anything to do with religion, did it? Maybe someday it would disappear. But for now — well, his own saintly mother owned slaves. To denounce slavery would be like denouncing his own mother.

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beauty and glory of God's works are revealed to the mind by a light beaming from itself.

. . . We believe in the Divine infinity through something congenial with it in our own breast. . . . To me it seems that the soul, in all its higher actions, in original thought, in the creations of genius, in the soarings of imagination, in its love of beauty and grandeur, in its aspirations after a pure and unknown joy, and especially in . . . the spirit of self-sacrifice . . .

. . . , has a character of infinity. There is often a depth in human love, which may be strictly called unfathomable. There is sometimes a lofty strength in moral principle, which all the power of the outward universe cannot overcome. There seems a might within, which can more than balance all might without.

. . . To honor [the Divine] is not to tremble before [it] as an unapproachable sovereign, not to utter barren praise which leaves us as it found us. It is to become what we praise. . . . It is to thirst for the growth and invigoration of the divine principle within us.

. . . The divinity is stirring within the human breast. . . . Let [us] hold fast . . . a faith in the greatness of the human soul, that faith, which looks beneath the perishing body, beneath the sweat of the laborer, beneath the rags and ignorance of the poor . . . and discerns in the depths of the soul a divine principle, a ray of the Infinite Light, which may yet break forth and shine as the sun. . . .

I wonder if you've ever felt torn like that.

Could human beings who are the very manifestations of God hold other human beings in bondage, as property? Could three million godlike human beings *be* enslaved? How was it possible?

There were early agitators against slavery, like William Lloyd Garrison. Dr. Channing found their fiery, harsh rhetoric upsetting. Surely, they don't have to use such scorching language and be so fanatical! Garrison tried for two years to get Channing to attend a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society, and unrelentingly sent him antislavery publications.

Channing had a special fondness for a young colleague named Samuel J. May. Sam May had traveled in the South too and he'd seen slavery, and he had joined the Anti-Slavery Society. But he was also a protege of the very proper, respectable Dr. Channing, and a regular guest.

And on one of his visits one autumn day in 1834, Sam May was listening, *again*, to Channing's carping about the harshness of the language and tactics of the abolitionists and he could listen to it no longer. The delicate young Sam May was about to hear a rebuke of the great Dr. Channing coming from his own lips, something he could never have imagined himself saying. Well, out it just came. This is from Samuel J. May's book, *Recollections of Our Anti-Slavery Conflict*¹:

The Doctor dwelt upon these objections [to the Abolitionist movement] . . . until I became impatient, and, forgetting for the moment my wonted deference, I broke out with not a little warmth of expression and manner: —

“Dr. Channing,” I said, “I am tired of these complaints. The cause of . . . our oppressed, crushed colored countrymen, has called as loudly upon others as upon us

Abolitionists. *We* are not to blame that wiser and better men did not espouse it long ago. The cry of millions, suffering the most cruel bondage in our land, had been heard for half a century and disregarded. ‘The wise and prudent’ saw the terrible wrong, but thought it not wise and prudent to lift a finger for its correction. . . . We Abolitionists are what we are, — babes, obscure men, silly women, and we shall manage this matter just as might be expected of such persons as we are. It is unbecoming in abler men who stood by and would do nothing, to complain of us because we do not better.

“Dr. Channing,” I continued with increased earnestness, “it is not *our fault* . . . that those who might have pleaded for the enslaved so much more wisely and eloquently, both with the pen and the living voice than we can, have been silent. We are not to blame, sir, that you, who, more perhaps than any other man, might have so raised the voice of remonstrance that it should have been heard throughout the length and breadth of the land, — we are not to blame, sir, that you have not so spoken. . . .”

At this point I bethought me to whom I was administering this rebuke, — the man who stood among the highest of the great and good in our land, — the man whose reputation for wisdom and sanctity had become world-wide, — the man . . . I had been accustomed to revere more than any other one living. I was almost overwhelmed with a sense of my temerity. . . . I awaited his reply in painful expectation. The minutes seemed very long that elapsed before the silence was broken. Then in a very subdued manner and in the kindest tones of his voice he said, “Brother May, I acknowledge the justice of your reproof. I have been silent too long.” Never shall I forget his words, look, whole appearance. I then and there saw the beauty, the magnanimity, the humility of a truly great soul. He was exalted in my esteem even more than before.

¹ Samuel J. May. *Recollections of our Antislavery Conflict*. Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co., 1869, pp. 173-75.



And then his slave-holding mother died. And that summer he spent his study-months at Newport writing what became one of the most cogent, compelling cases against slavery, this little book, *Slavery*², which would appear that Fall and turn many in his church against him.

Not long after that, the Massachusetts Legislature was considering a truly appalling bill proposed by Governor Edward Everett to make it a crime to publish any criticism of Southern slavery, and the American Anti-Slavery Society asked for a hearing on the bill, and Sam May, and Charles Follen, and William Lloyd Garrison all came to testify against it. Follen was cut off mid-testimony and not allowed to finish, and the others were treated with sneering contempt.³ Tension. On one side of the room, the respectable gentlemen of Boston. On the other, those dangerous fanatical abolitionists. And the door opened, and there was Dr. Channing.

The British abolitionist Harriet Martineau was there. She wrote:

It was a harsh day, and he did not go out much in the winter. He stood a moment in the doorway, wrapped in his cloak. As soon as he was seen, several gentlemen stepped forward and offered him a seat, but without taking it, he looked around until he saw where Mr. Garrison was sitting, and went and sat down by his side. . . . Dr. Channing meant to have it seen that he was in full sympathy with Mr. Garrison's purposes . . .⁴

And — here's how another great Transcendentalist Unitarian minister, James Freeman Clarke,⁵ describes it:

² William Ellery Channing. *Slavery*. Boston: James Munroe & Co., 1835.

³ James Freeman Clarke. *Anti-Slavery Days: A Sketch of the Struggle Which Ended in the Abolition of Slavery in the United States*. New York: R. Worthington, 1884, p. 104.

⁴ Harriet Martineau. "The Martyr Age of the United States," published in *Westminster Review* XXXII, December 1838.

⁵ James Freeman Clarke. *Memorial and Biographical Sketches*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1878, pp. 158-162.

The door of the committee-room opened, and there stood Dr. Channing. He was invited by the [legislative] committee to come and sit with them: but he walked across the room, came up to Garrison, took him by the hand, and sat down by his side; thus showing his determination, as he did on all occasions, to stand by any one who was oppressed, no matter what was the weight of power against him.

When Mr. Garrison was the most unpopular man in Boston, and he the most admired, Dr. Channing took him by the hand. When Abolition and Abolitionists were odious, Dr. Channing laid the weight of his great character in this scale . . .



On a cold, gray Sunday morning in January of 1840⁶ Channing left his Boston parsonage to walk to the Federal Street church. He was on his way to preach the last sermon of his life, save one, from the pulpit of the only church he ever served.

Earlier that month, one of Channing's closest friends, the Rev. Charles Follen, had died in a fire at sea. Dr. Follen was a firebrand of the Antislavery Society. He was also minister of what is now Follen UU Church in Lexington, but even his own church wouldn't allow the Anti-Slavery Society to conduct a memorial service for Follen in their building, which Follen himself had designed. They wanted something quiet, please don't mention his antislavery.

When Channing and the Anti-Slavery Society decided that Follen's memorial service should be conducted by Channing at Federal Street Church — Channing's own Standing Committee — the board — unanimously denied them the use of the church. Channing was desolated.

So on this gray cold Sunday morning, Dr. Channing put on his silk pulpit gown. Over

⁶ I am indebted to Charles Scot Giles for this telling of the story. It's contained in a 1980 Channing Bicentennial publication by the Unitarian Universalist Association.

his shoulders Mrs. Channing placed his cape. He stopped by his study near the parlour of the house to pick up the morning's sermon. Only this morning it wasn't exactly a sermon; it was a memorial service for Charles Follen.

As he walked toward Federal Street, there was a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. To memorialize Follen in defiance of the Standing Committee was going to be the end of his life's career, which had been his whole life. Today, it would all be over. It was a cold morning, but walking on, he could feel the palms of his hands sweating.

He reached the church as it began to rain. He entered and removed the damp cape. Every member of the Standing Committee was present, their stone faces somber. He climbed the stairs to the pulpit, laid the memorial service down, looked out over the congregation, and began. He said his friend Follen was one to whom "the most grievous sight on earth was the sight of a human oppressed, trodden down by his brother. To lift him up, to make him free, to restore him to human dignity . . . this seemed to him the grandest work on earth." He would climb the steps of that pulpit only once more, shortly before his death in 1842. He was paid no more salary. He spent his last days travelling from town to town to speak against slavery.



So what took this reluctant radical from the safety of inertia to the forefront of the greatest struggle of his age? What finally brought him to the creative, dangerous edge?

At the core of him, as it is at the core of us all, was a self bigger than the reluctant, cautious invalid who had come in out of the rain — a self bearing a likeness to God because, as Dr Channing was beginning to realize, that creative, evolving power, that fearless impulse — the same power and impulse that created everything that is — is the same power from which our lives flow. It is who, when you get beyond ego, we are.

But Dr Channing had learned, as we all learn, the small, contracted life of the ego. He'd learned from earliest infancy — learned self-preservation. And he learned to conform to the rules of the society about him, and he learned to put his trust in a God-out-there, some being in the heavens separate from himself. And he learned to be concerned with his own image in the world, how he appeared in the eyes of others.

He'd learned to care about self-preservation. He'd seen how William Lloyd Garrison had been dragged half-naked through the streets of Boston by people who thought him some crazy dangerous lunatic. He saw how, after Garrison was dragged through the streets and nearly lost his life, Boston's Mayor Lyman had charged *him* with inciting the mob and had held him in jail.

He'd learned to care about his image. He knew what people said about the abolitionists, and, in contrast, he was very aware of how deeply revered *he* was by the people of Boston and the congregation.

He'd learned to conform to the rules of society, and in the 1820s and 30s, slavery was both legal and accepted. The Bible accepted the idea of slavery. Didn't St. Paul instruct slaves to obey their masters? And his own saintly mother owned slaves. What, after all, can you expect in a world of fallen sinners?



So he hesitated, but not comfortably, because he was torn, because he was beginning to realize something more, because his spiritual life was taking him into into a more highly evolved quality of consciousness.

That sermon called *Likeness to God* — in it he said:

the likeness to God . . . belongs to man's higher or spiritual nature. It has its foundation in the original and essential capacities of the mind. In proportion as these are unfolded by right and vigorous exertion, it is extended and brightened. . . In proportion

as they are perverted and overpowered by the appetites and passions, it is blotted out. In truth, moral evil, if unresisted and habitual, may so blight and lay waste these capacities, that the image of God in man may seem to be wholly destroyed.

He had to wonder: what were millions of people doing to themselves, destroying their own higher nature? How could God allow such a thing to be done to the slaves themselves, they who also bore this likeness to God?

And so he anguished. His colleagues worried about him. His own assistant minister Ezra Styles Gannett rebuked him for hints of sympathy with ideas that could provoke the South and undermine law and order, and for befriending the dangerous fanatic Garrison.

But here was the real revelation that I am sure changed his life. Throughout his life, in that childhood church, in divinity school, in the minds of the people of his congregation and in the whole society, *God* meant somebody out there, somebody separate from who and what you are.

But — who *are* we, anyway? and *what*?

If you understand that the creative, evolving power, that fearless impulse — that created everything that is —

is not something separate from our own highest selves, that evolutionary impulse at the core of us,

—

Then the question of why God would allow so great an evil as slavery comes down to the question, *why do I, William Ellery Channing, tolerate so great an evil.* And then this higher self begins to bring its own, transcendently high value-sphere into his life, and he begins to live in that sphere of values, far above and beyond the values of a society that was quite willing to hold human beings in bondage and buy them and sell them as merchandise.

This had to have been a time of real spiritual revolution for Dr Channing. Where, after

all, does one get the wisdom and the courage to do what he was beginning to realize he must do?

He answered that, too, in that sermon: That unbounded spiritual energy which we call God is conceived by us only through consciousness, through the knowledge of ourselves. These terms we have framed to express operations or faculties *of our own souls.*

Dr. Channing now knew he had a choice. He could identify himself with his cautious, self-protective, image-conscious ego, or he could understand himself as an expression of something higher, the very creative, evolutionary power at the heart of everything. And now Dr Channing was approaching the divine fearlessness for which we remember him, and toward which we, too, might hunger and thirst and strive in these most threatening of times, when greedy oil executives and the reckless consumption and habits of the public and our own complicity with it and a deeply corrupt political apparatus threaten to poison and suffocate and inundate very life on earth. Are we afraid, still identified with our egos, like Dr. Channing at first was?



No, not fallen, depraved creatures capable of no good. Not that, but expressions of the divine who don't know who we are, who don't understand that the energy and intelligence that created the universe is the same power from which our lives might flow.



There's a bitter-sweet ending to the story of Dr. Channing. His congregation didn't want to hear about any of this. From the day he turned that Sunday service into the memorial for Charles Follen, he was forbidden to preach there again. And he spent his last days, sick as he was, travelling from town to town to address whoever would listen on the subject of slavery. His final address was at Lenox, and then he went on to Bennington, where he was

too ill to continue. And he lay dying, looking out at the Green Mountains, and he said he could hear a transcendently beautiful, unearthly music, and he said he'd received "many messages from the Spirit." He knew who and what he was.

When Channing died, Massachusetts' great, great Senator Charles Sumner said this: What seemed to me a sight almost sublime, was this weak old man, almost fading out of life, with a voice affected by the debility of his frame, uttering words that pass mountains and seas, overcoming the impediments of distance and boundaries, and . . . pleading trumpet-tongued for humanity, for right, for truth.⁷

⁷ Letter by Charles Sumner to Samuel Ward, Oct. 5, 1842, published in *Putnam's Monthly*, Vol. III, Oct. 1907-March 1908, p. 166.

These had been his last public words, spoken in Lenox on the first of August 1842 — I have turned aside to speak of the great stain on our country, which makes us the byword and scorn of the nations; but I do not despair. Mighty powers are at work in the world. Who can stay them? A new . . . reverence for humanity, a new feeling of brotherhood [and sisterhood] . . . this is among the signs of our times. We see it; do we not feel it? Before this, all oppressions are to fall. Society silently pervaded by this, is to change its aspect of universal warfare for peace. The power of selfishness, all-grasping and seemingly invincible, is to yield to this diviner energy.

He had chosen to surrender his every breath to that higher self. And that choice is always ours.