

# Ikons

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Channing Memorial Church  
November 4, 2007

*A sermon preached at Channing Memorial Church in Newport Rhode Island, on November 4, 2007, on the occasion of the presentation of a portrait of William Ellery Channing to that church.*

It's good to be with you here in Newport on this Sunday when William Ellery Channing comes back to his hometown.

He was born here in 1780 (April 8) to a successful lawyer, John Channing, and a loving but strict mother, Lucy Ellery Channing. His parents were bright and liberal citizens, who honored the memory of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. They attended the liberal Congregational church in town. At the end of the Revolution they freed their slaves.

William, the third of seven children, went in and out of the homes of his parents' servants, as freely as in his own. He felt as alien to the public drunkenness of this port city and its slave trade as did his parents. He hated the floggings at Master Roger's school, more an insult to the spirit, he recalled, than to the body. His classmates remembered him as sensitive, generous, open-hearted and outspoken despite his gentleness.

He loved this city, wandering its wharves and beaches alone for hours on end, flying his kite alone, nursing young birds in the woods and horrified, when someone found their fallen nest and killed them.

One experience shaped his subsequent faith. Once his father took him to a nearby church where the preacher threatened his listeners with visions of eternal fire, and assured them that their good deeds and prayers could never save them from the coming flames - unless a capricious God chose to save them. Young Channing walked home with his father, silent, filled with fear. "Sound doctrine," said his father, and Channing's spirits sank even lower. He was surprised therefore a little later to hear his father begin to whistle and on reaching home, instead of warning the family of their impending doom, he sat down in his favorite chair, and read the newspaper. And then Channing understood. His father didn't believe a word of it. Channing resolved at that point never to preach a doctrine unless he believed it completely.

His father died suddenly when he was thirteen, and despite their straightened circumstances his mother packed him off to Harvard - at age fourteen. When he graduated four years later at the head of his class, his classmates chose him to give the class oration at commencement. Despite this recognition Channing did not choose the work of ministry..

In fact, like so many graduates today, he had no idea of what he was going to do. So, at age eighteen he came back to Newport, to the comfort of his home and the solace of the beaches. After a few months of rest and recreation he went to Richmond VA where he tutored the children of the U.S. Marshall there. There he saw with his own eyes the degraded, wretched life of America's slaves. Angry, frustrated, sick, depressed, he at length came back again to Newport, and again in Newport he regained his health and spirits. At age twenty he decided to be a minister.

He spent the next two years reading theology at the Redwood Library and ruminating on Newport's beaches. He spent nine months at Harvard completing his studies, and in the fall of 1805, age twenty-five, he preached his first sermon to the Cambridge Association of Ministers. He chose his text from the book of Acts (3:6): "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have I give thee." They licensed him.

He preached that sermon a few more times, notably at the Brattle Street and the Federal Street churches in Boston. Both churches called him to their pulpits, but the ever-diffident Channing, doubted his ability and declined both invitations. Again he came back to Newport, but even here he could not escape attention. Dr. Patten at Second Congregational asked him to preach the midweek sermon and once more Channing gave the gold and silver sermon, One quote from that sermon shows his life-long theme.

"All Christian morals may be reduced to one word, love. God is love. Christ is love, Perhaps Christ, when on earth, won the hearts of publicans and sinners more by his gentle manners and offices of kindness, when he ate and drank with them, than by exhibiting his miracles." He concluded simply with, "People need sympathy more than silver and gold."

That was Channing's theme seventeen years later, when he preached at the ordination of Jared Sparks in Baltimore. By then he was Boston's pre-eminent preacher in Boston, pastor to the prestigious Federal Street Church in Boston, whose call he'd finally accepted.

When Unitarian émigrés from New England founded a Unitarian church in Baltimore, they called a young Harvard graduate, Jared Sparks, to be their minister, and they chose Channing to give the ordination sermon. They wanted him to announce the new Unitarian Christian principles not just to the city of Baltimore, but to the nation at large. For, they planned print Channing's sermon, and send it to throughout the nation.

In his hour-long ordination sermon Channing described to his listeners how Unitarians interpreted scripture, and on that scriptural basis, proceeded to reject the Trinity, exalt Christ's humanity as well as his divinity, and, above all, describe and soliloquize on God's benevolence.

Hear just three sentences from that sermon: "We give the first place to the love of God. We believe that this principle is the true end and happiness of our being, that we were made for union with our Creator, that his perfection is the only sufficient object and true

resting place for the insatiable desires and unlimited capacities of the human mind, and that without God our noblest sentiments ... would wither and decay.... As God is essential goodness, holiness, justice and virtue, so is he the life, motive and sustainer of virtue in the human soul.”

That was the sermon and those were the sentiments which launched the national Unitarian movement.

Channing was 23 when he went to the Federal Street Church. He was paid, incidentally, \$25/Sunday plus the use of a house (on Mt. Vernon Street) and an annual supply of firewood. He served that church for over thirty-eight years, drawing large congregations and becoming the spokesman for our movement. Emerson called him “our bishop.”

Although averse to controversy Channing spoke out on public issues. He opposed slavery with increasing frequency and passion, although his church leaders did not agree with him. He spoke on education, literature, temperance, ministry to the poor, Napoleon, John Stuart Mill and every conceivable religious subject.

In addressing the state legislature he said: “I call that mind free which jealously guards its rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive and hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, (and) receives new truth as an angel from heaven...”

In a warning as timely now as then Channing proceeded to say: “We say we have no Inquisition. But a sect skillfully organized, trained to utter one cry, combined to cover with reproach whoever may differ from them, to drown the free expressions of opinion by denunciations of heresy, and to strike terror into the community by joint and perpetual menace - such a sect is as perilous and palsying to the intellect as the Inquisition.”

Despite his stature among Unitarians, Channing opposed forming the American Unitarian Association in 1825. He refused to serve as its first president, saying, “I was a little disappointed in learning that the Unitarian Association is to commence operations immediately ... the office which you in your kindness have assigned to me I must beg to decline.” He wrote a friend, “I distrust sectarian influence more and more. I am more detached from a denomination and ... am little of a Unitarian. I strive to feel connection with the Universal Church of all good and holy men ... who look for a purer...manifestation of Christian truth.” The year before he died he told the congregation at The First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia: “We must shun the spirit of sectarianism as from hell. We must shudder at the thought of shutting up God in any denomination.” What Channing would make of America’s religious scene today, including our own UUA, is not hard to imagine.

Such was the courage of this gentle man, who died of typhoid fever age 62 at an inn in Bennington Vt. His last reported words were, “I have received many messages from the spirit.”

When died he was a presence and a power not just New England, but in the nation as well. And, therefore, it's not surprising that those who found his words to be true and his spirit uplifting, might want a representation of him. I've counted at least ten.

Washington Allston painted Channing when he was 31. Chester Harding, recently returned from Paris, painted his picture; when he was 49. A sculptor named Persico made a bust of him at age 55. Gilbert Stuart painted him, but the family never liked that portrait.

Channing himself disliked all these representations. He wrote his son (20 November 1835): "I am certainly not vain of my exterior. My countenance would not make me many friends, I fear. What has troubled me in my different portraits is, not that they have not given me a more intellectual expression, but that so little benevolence has beamed from my features. I have learned, with the Apostle, to prefer charity to all knowledge; and if I am to be handed down to posterity, I should be pleased to speak from the stone or canvass, or rather to breathe from it, goodwill to all mankind."

When he wrote that, Channing probably did not know that a young Sicilian opera singer and reformer, named Spiridione Gambardella, had just arrived in New York as a political exile. A man of many parts he took up portrait painting and did well at it. Channing's friends heard of this painter and suggested him to Channing, or perhaps to one of Channing's wealthy friends.

In 1836 Channing wrote his son (August 3) "I am sitting for a likeness, a wearisome task; but I was willing, since many poor likenesses have been made, to try once more for a good one."

Two years later he wrote his son, "Mr. Gambardella has succeeded in his work. My friends are entirely satisfied with the picture. It is not only a good likeness but a meritorious work of art. After so many unsuccessful attempts, this poor face is faithfully transferred to canvas, and, on the whole, is better worth looking at than many supposed."

After Channing's death (three years later) this painting went to his daughter, Mary Channing Eustis, who gave it to Harvard. It now hangs near the circulation desk at the Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge.

Two copies were made of this original, the second of which you now own. The first copy was made in 1867 by twin brothers, Darius and Cyrus Cobb of Medford. This painting, once owned by the Hayden Channing family, now belongs to the Arlington Street Church.

I wish I could tell you who painted your copy of the Gambardella original, but I can't. I don't know. I had a great lead, an interesting and gifted lady named Adelene Moffat, but her potential biographer has no record that Ms Moffat, although a painter, actually made this copy.

My wife remembers driving to New Hampshire or Vermont, in the late 1930's or early 40's with her father, Dana Greeley, then minister of the Arlington Street Church. He procured this copy which you now own from someone -perhaps a lady. I wish I'd asked my father-in-law about this painting, but at the time I didn't know that I would someday own it.

Soon after receiving this painting I put it in my study closet where I hoped my grandsons would not discover it and decide that it would make a nifty dart board. More positively, I came to feel that it should go to a church which bore the name of Channing. Your church was the natural candidate, but at the time I thought you owned a painting of your namesake. So I looked elsewhere.

The UU fellowships named for Channing were new, small in size and to my mind unproven. I wanted this painting to go to a church which had some promise of longevity.

For some reason I called your minister, and imagine my surprise, pleasure and relief when Amy Freedman told me that you had only a photograph of the Gambardella original, and a bad one at that. That ended my anxiety about poor William Ellery shut up in my closet for over ten years. We met and arranged the terms of transfer. Peter Williams, a member of Old Ship Church in Hingham and a surviving member of a founding family of that church, has done a wonderful job of restoration. He is here this morning. Mr. Williams, would you please stand?

These words are prolegomena to the most important event of this morning's celebration - the unveiling of the copy of that one portrait which Channing felt did justice to his spirit and his message.

So now let's take a look at him. But I ask you to look in silence. Please refrain from applause so that you can concentrate just on seeing.

Alright. Now remember that Channing complained that his previous portrayals showed only his intellectual side and - to quote - "so little of benevolence beamed from my features." Here we see a portrait which he considered his best likeness, a work of art, and - I would assume - one that portrayed the charity which he found lacking in the earlier portraits.

Yet, the face here is quite serious. He looks directly at us with open eyes, a gentle face, but without a hint of humour. He does not smile. He does not invite us to an easy friendship. This is someone whom we must live with in order to know.

Of course, Channing was sitting for the initial sketches and we could hardly expect him to hold a grin during those hours. But even I can't imagine Channing doing that even if he could.

In fact, his portrait reminds me of the ikons which we see in Greek and Russian Orthodox churches. You have doubtless seen them - the solemn faces of Christ, Mary, disciples,

saints. Their expressions range from sad to absolutely wooden, but there's no ha-ha about any of them. And why?

I think because the joy they represent, the joy to which these ikons invite us are a world deeper than the feelings and experiences which elicit a smile. Some sorrows are too deep for tears, some joys too deep for laughter.

An ikon invites us to look, not just at it, but through it: to see the face, of course, but to see the world of experience which the face has seen. And in seeing the world which the subject has seen, we may see something in ourselves and our world we had not seen before.

That's why they say that an ikon is first a window and then a mirror - a window into another world, then a mirror of ourselves.

First, you see the ikon, and then you see the ikon seeing you.

In giving you this portrait I have given you an ikon of Channing, a window into the world which he saw, felt, and thought about. You will be looking at him, but you may find him looking at you, inviting you into his world, and thus learning what he himself had felt, thought, experienced.

To help you do this I am going to give you something else - a copy of the sermon which Channing preached in Baltimore and which launched the national expansion of Unitarianism. But it's a special copy.

It was made by a man who loved Channing and his message. Many ministers read Channing's great address in seminary, once if ever, and never look at it again. Not so with Frank Schulman, minister of our churches in Worcester, Youngstown Ohio, Houston, the United Kingdom and Manchester College Oxford, where he served as chaplain and himself earned two doctorates. He was also a calligrapher.

Frank Schulman loved Channing's Baltimore sermon so much that he inscribed that sermon in this hardbound volume from which I read the morning lesson. Heaven knows how many hours he spent at this labor. When I officiated at his burial at the family summer place in Little Compton, his widow gave me this book, and with her permission I give it to you as the verbal incarnation of Channing.

I hope you will treasure this painting and the subject's spirit and message. I hope you will find his life interesting and relevant to yours. I hope when you look at this painting, you might remember Channing's first sermon and his gospel: "God is love. Christ is love... People need sympathy more than silver and gold."

God bless you and thank you for giving my friend a permanent home, since Channing has again come back to Newport.

His nephew Henry Channing and more recently Arthur Brown have both written fine biographies: *The Life of William Ellery Channing* reprinted by Regina Press in 1976, and *Always Young for Liberty* published in 1956 by Syracuse University Press. Channing's biography contains an appendix, called "Notes," which describes the painting.

A list of representations of Channing is appended to this sermon.

#### CHANNING'S PROTRAYALS

by Carl Scovel (Nov. 2007)

- 1794? a pencil sketch by the self-taught Newport native and miniaturist, Edward Greene Malbone
- 1811 unfinished, by Harvard school mate Washington Allston, an American pioneer in the Romantic painting of landscape, and a poet as well. This depiction appears in the first volume of Channing's memoirs (1848.)
- 1829 by Chester Harding, recently returned from Paris, and settled in Boston. This picture may now be at the Unitarian Universalist Association
- ? a profile, unfinished, probably by Jared Bradley Flagg or George Whiting Flagg of New Haven
- 1835 a bust by E. Luigi Persico, who came from Naples in 1818
- 1836 Spiridione Gambaradella begins sketching for a portrait, which was completed in 1838. Channing, unhappy with his previous depictions, felt this painting best represented him. Channing's daughter, Mary Channing Eustis, owned this picture and I believe it was she who gave it to Harvard University. It now hangs near the subscription desk in the library of Harvard Divinity School.
- 1842 Channing's death
- 1843 painting by ? Ingraham from a sketch after his death and from memory
- 1867 Cyrus and/or Darius Cobb, twin brothers, of Medford MA make a copy of the Gambardella original. This copy, once owned by Hayden Channing family now belongs to the Arlington Street Church.

Another copy was made, I'd guess later, and possibly owned by the Boston merchant, and parishioner of Channing, Thomas Hadasyd Perkins. It was eventually acquired in around 1940 by Dana McLean Greeley, then minister of the Arlington Street Church, and now hangs in the sanctuary of the Channing Memorial Church in Newport, Rhode Island..

1892 Statue in Touro Park in Newport RI by William Clark Noble, who established his practice there in 1879.

? Statue opposite Arlington Street Church, by William Clark Noble

William Henry Channing, Wm. Ellery's nephew and biographer, says in the appendix to that book, *The Life of William Ellery Channing*, (reprinted by Regina Press in 1976) that one copy belonged for a time to Boston merchant, Thomas Handasyd Perkins. Channing's notes with the help of Google are the basis for much of this information. No photograph ever taken of Channing.

2007 Frederic C. Eustis of Milton MA tells me that the family has a portrait of C.

Eugene Navias, archivist at Arlington Street Church, tells me that Bank of Boston has a painting of Channing, but can't find out where it is or who knows.