

## Channing Memorial Church

January 10, 2010

CALL TO WORSHIP

Rev. Amy Freedman

[Adapted from "Christian Worship," William Ellery Channing, 1836]

We gather for worship in a living Memorial to William Ellery Channing. Channing did not live to see this magnificent church building, but he spoke at the Dedication of this congregation at our first religious home on nearby Mill Street. Our Call to Worship this morning echoes Channing's words and spoken at the Dedication of this religious community in 1836.

Come, to this place to worship with the soul,  
with aspiration for spiritual light and life.  
Come, to find heaven now,  
to anticipate the happiness of that better world by breathing its spirit.  
Come, to worship in spirit and in truth;  
that is, intelligently, rationally, with clear judgment,  
such as is due to the Fountain of intelligence and truth.  
Come to worship with your heart as well as your intellect, with life, fervor, zeal.  
Sleep over your business if you will, but not over your religion.  
Come to worship with strong conviction,  
with living faith in a higher presence than the eye,  
with a feeling of God's presence not only around you,  
but in the depths of your soul.  
Come to worship with overflowing gratitude,  
with a love willing and earnest to do and work,  
and welcome joyfully every holy impulse, every accession of strength to virtuous  
purpose, to the love of God and man.  
The great end for which you are to worship here  
is that you may worship everywhere.  
You are to feel God's presence here  
that it may be felt wherever you go, whatever you do.  
The very idea of spiritual homage is that it takes possession of the soul,  
and becomes a part of our very being.

Come, let us worship together.

CHALICE LIGHTING:

Worship is the mystery within us  
reaching out to the mystery beyond.  
It is an inarticulate silence yearning to speak;  
It is the window of the moment  
open to the light of the Eternal.

—Jacob Trapp

READING: *Each of Us is an Artist*, Arthur Graham

Each of us in an artist  
 Whose task it is to shape life  
 Into some semblance of the pattern  
 We dream about. The molding  
 Is not of self alone, but of shared  
 Tomorrow and times we shall never see.  
 So let us be about our task.  
 The materials are very precious and perishable.

READING *Little Gidding*, No. 4 of Four Quartets, T.S. Eliot

What we call the beginning is often the end  
 And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
 The end is where we start from. And every phrase  
 And sentence that is right...

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,  
 Every poem an epitaph. And any action  
 Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat  
 Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.  
 We die with the dying:  
 See, they depart, and we go with them.  
 We are born with the dead:  
 See, they return, and bring us with them.  
 The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree  
 Are of equal duration. A people without history  
 Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
 Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails  
 On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel  
 History is now and England.

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this  
 Calling

We shall not cease from exploration  
 And the end of all our exploring  
 Will be to arrive where we started  
 And know the place for the first time.  
 Through the unknown, unremembered gate  
 When the last of earth left to discover  
 Is that which was the beginning;  
 At the source of the longest river  
 The voice of the hidden waterfall  
 And the children in the apple-tree  
 Not known, because not looked for

But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
 Between two waves of the sea.  
 Quick now, here, now, always—  
 A condition of complete simplicity  
 (Costing not less than everything)  
 And all shall be well and  
 All manner of thing shall be well  
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
 Into the crowned knot of fire  
 And the fire and the rose are one.

The Larger Circle

Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman

Over last day or two all of Channing's members and friends received a letter from me sharing the following news: I have come to the decision that this will be my last year at Channing Church. This is the first public announcement. On Thursday evening, I notified the Governing Board. Following the recommendation of the Unitarian Universalist Association Department of Ministerial Transition, a letter was sent to insure the entire community learned this news at more or less the same time. This means my service as your minister will be completed at the end of the church year, June 30, 2010.

Many of you will be wondering or asking why now? Why would I choose to end my ministry here when Channing is doing so well? Some of you may suspect that there is some unknown or unspoken problem that would lead me to seek a change in my ministry. There is no such subtext. I have loved being your minister. I am proud to serve this community and all that we have accomplished together.

Quite simply, I feel that my time at this church has come to its natural conclusion. In some religious traditions, clergy is assigned by a hierarchical order. For example, in the Methodist tradition, it is known that a minister will only serve a church for five years before being assigned another parish. With our democratic polity, it is the congregation who calls a minister to serve them. Ministers search for a congregation that will be a good match with their skills and vision for a religious community. Once the congregation offers a call and the minister accepts, we enter into a letter of agreement which is a covenant, a promise of how we will be in community and work together as a team.

You may be interested to know that in Unitarian Universalism the average length of a settled ministry is seven to eight years. Since the Fall of 2000 when I joined you, there have been a lot of ministerial transitions in other Unitarian Universalist congregations. On October 17<sup>th</sup>, I celebrated the ten year anniversary of my ordination. Before coming here, I served for one year as an Interim Minister on Martha's Vineyard. This is my ninth year here in Newport.

Of course, there are exceptions. There are some Ministers in our tradition who fulfill their entire career in one place. In the history of this church, I am mindful of Charles T. Brooks, the first minister called to this congregation. He came to Newport at the age of twenty-four, was ordained by the congregation and served as the senior minister for forty years. Even after his retirement, Brooks continued to serve this community as a pastoral presence, scholar, and inspiring speaker until his death at the age of seventy. It is no wonder that a bronze medallion in honor of the Rev. Charles T. Brooks graces this Sanctuary.

When I received the call to serve as Channing's minister, I was thirty. I was thrilled to find a congregation in New England committed to shared ministry with such deep roots in our Unitarian heritage. Coming here for the preliminary interview with the Search Committee was the first time that I had ever been to Newport. However, with my paternal side originally from Brockton, my maternal side from New Bedford, and having spent summers on Cape Cod growing up, I felt immediately at home; much more at home than I ever had during my four years as a seminary student in Berkeley, CA. As I have often said, I knew I was home because everyone got my jokes. I no longer had to explain my sense of humor.

I arrived here as a single woman. With my professional life in place, I only longed for a partner to be my companion and to raise a family together. What most of you do not know, is that in the first two years of my settlement here, I performed a lot of weddings and attended all the receptions in the hopes of meeting Mr. Right. Even in romantic settings like Belcourt Castle and Rosecliff Mansion, the fairy tale encounter that I'd imagined never occurred. I always thought I had connected with the bride and groom. However, as I searched for my table number, time and time again I passed by the table with all the young singles, only to discover I had been assigned a place with all the elderly relatives. When I did manage to meet some eligible bachelor, once he realized who I was he suddenly began apologizing for swearing and despite my assurances, must have thought of me as a Nun.

As most of you know, I met my Prince Charming at a District Conference. My parents were an interfaith couple before becoming Unitarian so I had never considered that I would actually marry a UU. It has been delightful to have a partner who not only understands but shares my passion for this liberal religious movement. Peter is currently serving as the Growth Consultant for our District. However, his heart and brain overflow with energy and creative ways to share our faith. He is often a guest speaker, workshop leader, blogger, retreat facilitator, and media expert. Peter also works as a Children's Television producer in the Boston area. I mention this because meeting Peter has been a gift not only to my personal life but as a support in my ministry. Both of us longed for a partner with whom we could be fully ourselves. I have found in Peter a best friend who helps me realize the gifts of life.

Over these nine years, there have been a lot of significant rites of passage. One was purchasing my first home. More recently, my father passed way and my daughter

was born. It has been a blessing to be a part of this religious community during these significant life transitions.

At the same time, I recognize each one of you has also experienced significant life changes over the course of the last decade. As Ken Patten reminded us in our responsive reading this morning, *This House (#444)* is “*a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle.*” Here we are reminded that change is a natural part of living. Not something to battle against or to ignore, but part of the cycles of existence that deserves our collective attention, care, and reverence.

In the same way, the end of my ministry here is a natural transition. I will be taking time to consider new directions in my professional life. After ten years of ministry, I am still trying to figure out how to weave in my passions, including my love of drama and teaching. I also look forward to spending more time with my daughter Liza without the challenge of balancing full-time ministry and motherhood. As you have often reminded me, childhood passes in the blink of an eye. I do not want to miss it.

While it may be unknown exactly who will serve as your next minister, I can assure you that Channing is a wonderful community, a prize of a church. When I shared the news of my decision with our District Executive, he replied. “You are right as you state in your letter that Channing will be a highly desirable settlement.” What makes this an attractive job opportunity? Quite simply, you are a warm and welcoming congregation. You understand that ministry is not just the work of a called minister but the shared responsibility of each person who calls this church their spiritual home.

Over the last decade, there have been significant challenges including conflict over the Iraq War, a Treasurer who misappropriated our funds, a cracked steeple, tight budgets, and growing pains as we moved from a Family Church model through a Pastoral model toward becoming a Program Church. We have expanded our facilities, increased staff hours, become more visible in the community, declared ourselves as a Welcoming Congregation, worked to become a Green Congregation, launched a Small Group Ministry program, marched together, prayed together, ate lots of good food together, created a Vision Statement, wrote a Strategic Plan, uncovered the wooden floors in the sanctuary, rebuilt the pinnacle, restored several stained glass windows, and now after being completely disassembled stone by stone, our steeple stands once more as the tallest point in Newport with nine re-tuned bells and one brand new one. Together we have accomplished a great deal. We have a lot to celebrate. My Letter of Agreement states that I am required to give you three months notice. However, after almost nine years, and the intimate ways you have let me into your lives, I wanted you to know soon after I had come to this decision. I will be here through the end of the church year, June 30, 2010. We have time to reflect on our time together and make sure that things are in good order for the next phase in the life of this magnificent church.

I am sure that you have questions about the Ministerial Search Process and the Interim period that precedes it. Our association has a very specific process for handling ministerial transitions and for calling ministers. The process insures that you will be able

to call a minister who matches your style as a congregation and who will share your vision as a religious community.

I opened the service this morning with the words of William Ellery Channing spoken at the dedication of this congregation. His words remind me of the purpose of our faith, the reason that such a beautiful house of worship was erected, why we join a community that continually reminds us of the transient nature of our existence:

The great end for which [we] are to worship here  
is that [we] may worship everywhere.  
You are to feel God's presence here  
that it may be felt wherever [we] go, whatever [we] do.

Truly, we are blessed to be embraced by this Larger Circle. Over the next six months, I will treasure my time with all of you.

BENEDICTION, T.S. Eliot

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.  
We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Blessed Be.