“Heaven on Earth”

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Earlier this week, as I was thinking about the heaven on earth that we are creating that goes beyond our individual passions, I read a baseball story…. Maybe you saw it.

A reporter watching a game had the good fortune to have a home-run ball land at his feet, after it had bounced over a few other fans. (I should add this story is not about tribalism of sports, as so much of it is, but an intimation of “angels wearing the disguise of ordinary people leading ordinary lives.” (Tracy Chapman)

It was a Yankees’ home game against Kansas City. The homer was hit by the out of town player, and in some baseball parks the tradition is to throw the ball back onto the field, rather than keep it as souvenir. I guess having earned a run against the Yankees, the ball becomes impure, tainted, taboo.

The crowd started shouting for the reporter to toss it back onto the field. He was torn; a reporter should not take sides; a Yankee stadium home-run ball was feeling pretty special to him, notwithstanding local custom. The crowd shouted louder and louder…. Wearing press credentials, the reporter knew and feared that he was about to become part of the story.

He continues, “I had to think quickly. Unfortunately, this is not a strong suit…. I couldn’t throw the ball back.” (“I had never gotten my hands on a home-run ball.”) “Two seats to my right was a boy sitting with his father. I couldn’t throw the ball back, and I couldn’t keep it. So I reached over and put it in his glove.”

“A few knuckleheads then got on the kid to throw the ball back, but they were quickly drowned out.”

He adds that the boy had flown in that day with his father Felix Tejeda from Miami, toured the stadium in the afternoon, and was at the game that night, before returning home the next day. It was his son’s first Yankees’ game: a special trip by the father who worked nights in an industrial laundry. Mr. Tejeda told the reporter about the cost of the flight, the hotel, the tickets, the ballpark food, and then said it was like the credit card commercial on television: the look on his son’s face was “priceless”… a memory for decades to come. (“No Souvenir…,” Billy Witz, NY Times, 5/12/16, B16)
The reporter made a pretty good decision after all….

"look around… Believe in what you see…
We can and will be what we aspire to be…
I believe that this could be heaven….
Heaven here on earth."

Tracy Chapman’s lyrics were new to me last weekend, when they were presented as a reading by UUA Director of Multicultural Growth and Witness ministries, Taquiena Boston. She was the keynote speaker for our District meeting.

"Who knew," Taquiena said, “that Tracy Chapman was a Universalist Unitarian?”
And, in a bit, I will put some history around that observation when I turn to a 175th anniversary at hand in our tradition.

But first, a few words about Taquiena Boston’s keynote. In speaking with her here last month at Community when she was visiting for Rev. Brugnola’s Memorial Service, I learned that she was to be with our UU congregations at the district meeting and would thereby be miss her own 40th college reunion at Howard University on the same dates. And the Commencement speaker was President Obama, not announced until long after she had agreed to be the presenter for us.

To establish her theme, she began by telling us of a childhood memory of a commercial that showed vast fields of wheat, overflowing with a caption/a song about Life Abundant. And so it is, around us, awaiting us, Life Abundant for all of us, even as we are surrounded by the seductions of consumerism, materialism, tribalism, and now the blood sport of political insults, with heightened misogyny, xenophobia, racism, and narcissism.

Howard Thurman, the preacher, mystic, teacher, and mentor to Dr. King, and friend of our church, would affirm, “Everything is sustenance.”

How so? His grounding was powerful: “Life is alive.”

Life Abundant awaits as we live a faith in an “unfaltering belief in peace and love and understanding”… and work toward “heaven here on earth.” (Chapman)

Across our country, those of our faith and of many traditions seek to be counter-cultural witnesses in uniting us – with basic human values that transcend politics… matters such as respecting the worth and dignity of all, and creating a more just equitable society in the face of pandering to the worst in us, to fears, and to insecurity.

That is what bridge-building is about, and what we know and honor.
With allusion to the ancient myth of the Garden of Eden and its four rivers, Taquiena Boston continued and offered Life-giving waters that yet flow from the four rivers that enter the daily, fruitful venues of our lives.

Seeking/Finding Life Abundant, she reminded us of basics: we can draw upon four practices as “fortification.”


So much more graced us as her spirit filled the room, and I share with you this good and worthy affirmation about how to go about building the Beloved Community, which was Dr. King’s way of speaking in modern terms about creating the Kingdom of God on earth, language a bit archaic for some of us.

With this foundation – natural religion, Life Abundant ever growing, practices of Generosity, Hospitality, Gratitude, and Solidarity as we move into wider community, with all this, I return to the year 1841, with its transcendent impact.

1841. 175 years ago.

Prince Ito Hirobumi, who is to become one of the founders of modern Japan, was born. P. T. Barnum has just opened his “American Museum” of curiosities. English travel agent Thomas Cook is organizing his first tour. “The New York Tribune” begins publication under Horace Greeley, a Universalist. Adolphe Sax invents the saxophone in Belgium. For the first time women receive university degrees in the United States. The slave trade from Africa continues unabated, but the U.S.S. Creole carrying slaves from Virginia to Louisiana is seized by those slaves who sail to Nassau and to freedom. Emerson has published his first volume of essays.

1841 - A fascinating year.

It is May 19, 1841. 175 years ago this week.... At a South Boston church at an ordination service, thirty-year-old Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker preached a sermon titled "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity."

How do I say this?

The universe will never be the same. Boston, the self-proclaimed Hub of the Universe, will never be the same.

Because of that sermon, the character of Unitarianism will change dramatically in the years to come. On that day in 1841, following the sermon, a different minister
offered the prayer of ordination, and in it he petitioned the ordinand and all present to ignore most of what the congregation had just heard from the Rev. Theodore Parker.

You and I here today are the heirs and the beneficiaries of that day, that moment, those words. Theodore Parker had not intended to create a controversy that day, but he did. He argued that creeds and doctrines were transient and that religion was permanent. What was essential and permanent was the pure religion of Jesus: Absolute Morality and Absolute Religion – love of God and love of Humanity. Creeds and theologies were simply products of history as were so many of the rituals of religion; the heresy of one age became the orthodoxy of another.

All of this was standard fare for Unitarians of that day. But Parker went further. He declared that the Bible was not the final authority of faith. He said that you must trust your Conscience – the sacred voice within you. He declared that Jesus was fully human, not Divine and that Jesus no doubt made errors, and that no doubt greater teachers might one day follow. He denied faith in Biblical miracles and placed his faith in the divinity of each person. He argued for natural religion and against revealed religion.

It was a scandal.

Like Emerson a few years earlier in 1838, Theodore Parker offered a manifesto for the Transcendentalist wing of the Unitarian faith. By emphasizing the unmediated, direct experience of the Divine within every soul – by emphasizing that religion relies not upon transient scriptures but personal experience and moral conscience, Parker helped to move Unitarianism beyond Christianity toward our present-day freedom of belief, inclusiveness, diversity, and embrace of universal values – the permanent.

Religion is so important we have to honor our own experience and think for ourselves about it. Theodore Parker spoke not only about the "divine life of the Soul" and being of service to God, but also about service to others. Religion is not simply an internal, private affair of personal spiritual growth. It may be that, but if it is only that, then it is idolatry of self.

He argued for a Sacrament of Works, Natural Religion, and in Tracy Chapman's words, "the collective conscience/We create the pain and the suffering and the beauty in this world / Heaven's here on earth."

Theodore Parker reports about a childhood incident. Walking home one day, he saw a lovely pond with rare flowers in bloom nearby. He stopped to enjoy it and saw a spotted tortoise basking in the sun. He was tempted to take a stick and hit the creature, as he had seen other boys do, but had never done himself. However, he suddenly heard an inner voice "clear and loud, 'It is wrong!'"

Startled, he ran home where his mother heard his story with a tear in her eye. She said, "Some... call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul..."
If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you... without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice.... Parker concluded, “I am sure no other event in my life has made so deep and lasting an impression on me.”

Parker, who served a small Unitarian Church on the outskirts of Boston, was soon asked to become minister of the newly formed 28th Congregational Society in Boston. On his first Sunday of 1846, he began with the declaration, “A Christian Church should be a means of reforming the world....” And throughout the years he sought to keep that faith, while drawing thousands.

Theodore Parker, who still identified as a Christian, was preaching Transcendentalist natural religion, the pure religion of Jesus, and the religion of Absolute Morality, in which the Church must speak to the social issues of the day, the Church militant. He spoke to nature’s God in his prayers as Mother and Father God. He spoke of the Divine life of every soul.

He spoke of a Sacrament of Works with even greater intensity as he evolved more and more toward matters of social justice.

In one address, he declared, "If a minister is filled with this religion, it will not let him rest." And he did not rest. He was a social reformer and found himself engaged in the great movements of those times: public education, the abolition of capital punishment, prison reform, economic reform, the rights of women, of the poor, of labor, and issues of peace... – issues sadly still with us and with which we engage.

The cause for which he labored most was that of the abolition of slavery, and he harbored fugitive slaves in his home.

He spoke of writing his sermons with a loaded pistol by his side just in case it became necessary to defend and protect his illegal houseguests. I suppose he was received by many of the staid Boston Brahmins just about the way Malcolm X in all his brilliance was received by white America in the 1960s. Parker was dubbed the "best-hated man in America."

Why all this fame and notoriety?

He had this difficult, powerful religion that would not let him rest. A religion that insisted that the Church must reform the world. A religion that said divinity is within us and within your neighbor: Take that truth seriously.... and create Heaven here on earth.

His legacy is enormous. The Transcendentalist controversy liberated our religion to be what it is today: trusting of the free mind, inclusive, honoring personal experience, compassionate, and at its best activist, prophetic.
Today, the struggles continue to shape Life Abundant for all. The systemic racism and white supremacy, the denigration of women, the incessant war machinery that surrounds us, the economic stratification that treats children of god as refuse and debris, the fear of those who are different – these are still deeply ingrained in our structures of society.

And we here keep trying to hold on, and yes, we try to reform the world, not just grow our own souls.

Theodore Parker turned out to be a coiner of phrases, and Lincoln picked up the essence of "government of the people, by the people and for the people" from one of Parker's sermons.

And while the struggle continues into each new day, and it is sometimes wearisome, I think of Parker's words: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice." ("Justice and the Conscience," 1853)

Dr. King took up that language, image, of the arc of the moral universe... and truly it is our deeds that bend our world toward justice.

Both of those declarations based on Parker's eloquence are among five quotations woven into a new rug (created in 2010) for the Oval Office of the White House.

Theodore Parker – "The Transient and the Permanent" – 175 years of blessings in abundance.

Creating Heaven here on earth in our institutions, our politics, our commerce, and civil society.

And personal practices of Generosity, Hospitality, Gratitude, and Solidarity each day in service of Life Abundant.

"Angels wearing the disguise of ordinary people" doing ordinary things.

There is a parable offered by Heidi Neumark from her early ministry in the South Bronx. A Lutheran pastor, Neumark at an urban church conference for Unitarian Universalists some years ago spoke about a young girl named Danielle:

    Danielle’s mother, Deena, [had] died from an asthma attack brought on by smoking crack….
[Danielle] is ten and has eleven sisters and brothers. Some are older and on their own, and some of them went to live with a relative down South. That left five parentless children in the home. An uncle, known to be a compulsive gambler, moved in. Rumor had it that his main interest was in using the children to get money for his habit. I don’t know if that is true, but there’s little affection or attention shown to the children at home, except what they offer each other, which is considerable. Three of the youngsters were in our summer program.

One hot day when a swimming trip was planned for the afternoon, Danielle was brought to my office in tears. It turned out that she didn’t own a bathing suit. We decided that it would be all right to skip the morning math lesson and go out to get a suit.

The trip took us out over lunchtime, and so we stopped at a nearby McDonald's, where Danielle ordered a Happy Meal. She got up and came back with some extra napkins. Then she began divvying up the small bag of fries into five little piles, each on its own napkin. I asked her what she was doing, “My sisters and brothers will feel sad that I got french fries and they didn’t,” she explained. “I’m taking them home to share.”

“Sitting there in McDonald’s with Danielle,” reports Rev. Heidi Neumark, “I felt rich.” (Breathing Space, Beacon Press, 122)

A bit of Heaven on Earth… I believe…. I believe.

Meditation

On so many levels as Emerson observed, “Heaven walks among us ordinarily muffled in such triple or tenfold disguises that the wisest are deceived and no one suspects the days to be gods.”

May we enter into the spirit of meditation and prayer, a centering moment:

Life is a gift. Our days are brief.
People are precious. Caring counts ultimately.
Serving one another is our calling.
Be at peace even in doubt…
Each day.
This is the day that has been given to us. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen.

Readings

(1) In a sermon from 1855, Rev. Theodore Parker reflected upon his life and his religion this way:
Friends....! this day is a marked one in my life.

Fourteen years ago, the 19th of May, 1841, I preached an Ordination Sermon in Boston. "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity." It cost me my reputation in the "Christian Church;" even the Unitarian ministers, who are themselves reckoned but the tail of heresy, denounced me as "no Christian," and "Infidel." They did what they could to effect my ruin... and in every journal, almost every pulpit, denounced the young man who thought the God who creates earth and heaven had never spoken miraculously in Hebrew words bidding Abraham kill his only son and burn him for a sacrifice, and that Jesus of Nazareth was not a finality in the historical development of (hu)mankind.

Scarce a Protestant meeting-house in America, not a single theological newspaper, I think, but blew its trumpet with notes of alarm and denunciation. Behold! said they, behold a minister thinking for himself afresh on religion! Actually thinking! And believing his thought! and telling his own convictions!

Shame on us; the actual Jesus of History we have forgot.... There are thirty thousand ministers in the land; what if they all preached natural religion-- piety, morality and-- and natural theology, the philosophy of that religion. What a world it would soon become!

(2) "Heaven's Here On Earth"- Tracy Chapman

You can look to the stars in search of the answers
Look for God and life on distant planets
Have your faith in the ever after
While each of us holds inside the map to the labyrinth
And heaven's here on earth

We are the spirit the collective conscience
We create the pain and the suffering and the beauty in this world
Heaven's here on earth

In our faith in humankind
In our respect for what is earthly
In our unfaltering belief in peace and love and understanding

I've seen and met angels wearing the disguise
Of ordinary people leading ordinary lives
Filled with love, compassion, forgiveness and sacrifice
Heaven's in our hearts

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In our faith in humankind
In our respect for what is earthly
In our unfaltering belief in peace and love and understanding

Look around
Believe in what you see
The kingdom is at hand
The promised land is at your feet
We can and will become what we aspire to be
If Heaven's here on earth

If we have faith in humankind
And respect for what is earthly
And an unfaltering belief that truth is divinity
And heaven's here on earth

I've seen spirits
I've met angels
I've touched creations beautiful and wondrous
I've been places where I question all I think I know
But I believe, I believe, I believe this could be heaven

We are born inside the gates with the power to create life
And to take it away
The world is our temple
The world is our church
Heaven's here on earth

If we have faith in humankind
And respect for what is earthly
And an unfaltering belief
In peace and love and understanding
This could be heaven here on earth

Heaven's in our heart