

LONG JOURNEY. WHY WE STUMBLE.

A sermon for Ash Wednesday by F. Jay Deacon

Preached at Channing Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church, Newport

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Our great namesake, William Ellery Channing, championed what were, in his time, some radical religious ideas, and nowhere did his thinking sail so dramatically against the prevailing tide as his rejection of the inherent depravity of human beings, who were seen as fallen from some original innocence and incapable of any good. Which is why you didn't see throngs of people last Wednesday pouring out of Channing Church with ashes on their foreheads. May notta been on *your* calendar, but it was Ash Wednesday.

But you might have grown up with Ash Wednesday in a Roman Catholic, or Anglican, or Lutheran church, with the blessing of ashes, and they're placed on the foreheads of the worshipers, and you remember those words that come from Genesis, "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." It goes back to a time when penitents would cover themselves with ashes and wear sackcloth on account of their sins and, more to the point, their inherited, inherent sinfulness.

It all goes back to a piece of Christian doctrine that Dr. Channing famously challenged, over and over again—the Fall, Original Sin.

When a whole culture shares a story, like the story of the Fall, it shapes everything. The story of the Fall of humanity renders us very negative about ourselves, very pessimistic about what we're capable of, very suspicious of others.

And yeh, we're capable of great de-

structiveness, because we've become very powerful. You can't wipe out the world's population with a bow and arrow, but you can with thermonuclear weapons or the destruction of the biosphere. But if you consider yourself inherently evil and predisposed to evil, you might tend to live up to your assessment of yourself. Think unthinkable things and sometimes do them.

But there was no original perfection, and there was no Fall. The story of our humanity is the story of an *Ascent*, a *Rising*. Unitarian Universalists have never been crazy about the idea of being *dust*. We are *gods*, aren't we? You said so yourself. Yeh, I did say that.



So then, why do we stumble? And how do you account for the greed, the exploitation, the cruelty. People being beheaded and burned, their towns bombed into oblivion. Why are there, this morning, fifty-one million refugees, driven from their homes by war and violence, many facing cold winter winds today?

You can understand why so many people believe in original sin that infects us all. It's as though we've all got an unchosen nature that brings its own wants and drives and automatic reflex responses that sometimes gain control and we do stupid stuff. So theologians came up with this idea of original sin, depravity, the Fall, fall from original perfection. Hence, Ash Wednesday. Being Dust.



Our stumbling troubles us. It has to do, not

with original sin, but with something Plotinus observed seventeen and a half centuries ago: *Humankind is poised midway between the gods and the beasts.*

We are a strange amalgam of god and dust. We have this earlier, more primitive nature, an *unchosen* nature. Not because of a *Fall*, but because of an *Ascent* that still has a long way to go. It hasn't been an easy climb.

Loren Eiseley once wrote

We are rag dolls made out of many ages and skins, changelings who have slept in wood nests, or hissed in the uncouth guise of waddling amphibians. We have played such roles for infinitely longer ages than we have been human.¹

Carl Sandburg understood that when he wrote²

There is a wolf in me . . . fangs pointed for tearing gashes . . . a red tongue for raw meat . . . and the hot lapping of blood . . .

There is a fox in me . . . a silver-gray fox . . . I nose in the dark night and take sleepers and eat them and hide the feathers . . .

And sometimes, trying to live as conscious humans who possess reason and moral vision but driven by something we still carry with us, we stumble.



We ascended from reptiles, and you will no doubt have made the acquaintance of your own inner reptile. That reptile cares about what? Eating, surviving, and reproducing. And when it faces perceived danger, three responses kick in pretty much automatically: fight, flight, or freeze. Sometimes they help us. Sometimes they get us in quite a lot of trouble.

After awhile, our brains acquired a neat set of attachments, the limbic system, that

1 "The Starthrower," from *The Starthrower*. New York: Times Books, 1978, p.175.

2 From "Wilderness," in *Cornbuskers*, 1918.

made us paleomammals. Which meant *emotions* got attached to the reptilian drives, emotion that kicks in before reason.

Unlike reptiles, they nurture their young, they bond, they form social groups. So they care about their standing in the community and acceptance.

Sometimes that inner paleomammal can overrule the drives of your inner reptile when the reptile in you wants to do something uncool, because it cares about its reputation and doesn't want to be shamed.



But the really big new dimension that makes us human—is that prefrontal cortex, those frontal lobes that can do a bunch of very advanced executive functions. Which adds intentionality, purposefulness, and complex decisions. We've become a creature that can simply decide to ignore the drives of its less-evolved self. And it's capable of a high degree of self-awareness, its thoughts and feelings and drives and ideas. Now we can surface those drives in us that used to be hidden — drives that can run our lives. Examine them. Weight them against our values and dreams. Make choices. Maybe devote ourselves to a high purpose.

We can. Or we can slip back into reflex behavior, without the benefit of reflection. It's awfully easy.



Another new capacity we've acquired has complicated things. Not only do we have language. We can tell stories. And, apparently, it matters what stories we tell about ourselves and the Universe. Do we tell stories about exclusive, parochial gods who are jealous and petty and will as soon behead you for failure to conform to their rules and dogma? What *do* we worship and make supreme? Money, power, status? Do

we dare to dream a fairer, finer future?

When a whole culture shares a story, it shapes everything. What if it's the kind of barbaric stories embedded in premodern scriptures? Islam has them, and so does the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Highly-evolved spirituality — whether Christian or Jewish or Hindu or Islamic or whatever tradition — leaves those barbarisms in the distant past. The barbaric bits don't define these religions. But the stories and texts are there for the thugs who invented ISIS or ISIL, and they give growing throngs of people cover, religious license, to do the most repugnant things they can think of, just as the story of the bloody conquest of Canaan gave Crusaders and those who deny the humanity of Palestinians a kind of religious license for their most primitive, barbaric drives.

I listened to a series of reports on the BBC about refugees, whose humanity is denied. Refugees in Papua New Guinui living in hellish conditions and misery where Australia, which rejects them, now sends them; *nine million refugees* in Syria and refugees from Syria spread across Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq, living in appalling cold and privation and unceasing terror.



We stumble when we don't care, when we think we can simply resign from the human community and don't make any noise. Bless the UN High Commission for Human Rights refugee agency, bless Amnesty International, bless Doctors Without Borders, bless the UU Service Committee, bless these who show us the high possibilities of our humanity.

So, here we are with godlike powers and yet still carrying around this unchosen nature left over from our reptile days, our furry mammal days. Or, using our highly-advanced

capacities to imagine gods that are no more morally evolved than reptiles. *We are a strange amalgam of god and dust.*



God and dust. Nature's highest achievement, crowned with consciousness, capable of the insight and art that created Shakespeare's plays and Handel's music and Dr. King's moral vision. The human mind has penetrated deeply enough into the powers of nature to threaten the very continuance of life on Earth . . . godlike and demonic all at once. Alone among the inhabitants of the known Universe, we have the power to reflect, to make moral choices. No other creature can do that. It took the Universe, and the evolutionary impulse at the heart of the Universe, 14 billion years to come up with the achievement that we are.

There must be humility, but our humility cannot be a "grovelling."

Our Unitarian forebears were enlightened enough to dismiss the old Calvinist doctrine of human depravity, the conviction that you and I are pretty much a mess incapable of any good whatever. The wisest and best part of our religious traditions have forever returned to the theme of the seed of divine life that is in us, have said that the deepest longing of our hearts is the freeing and full unfolding of this divine potential. At Yom Kippur, the call is for a return to our truest selves. Beyond mere ego there's an authentic human-divine self.

In 1828, Dr. Channing, who was, after all, the founding figure of American Unitarianism, dared to declare — these are his words, in Providence — in 1828! —

The idea of God, sublime and [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. . . .

And he said that beneath and beyond the dust that we are — we have to be able to see:

the greatness of the human soul — that faith which . . . 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.



Not fallen, broken wretches. We are a very grand work — in progress.

Which means that sometimes we're going to feel like the great Secretary General of the United Nations in the 1960s, Dag Hammarskjöld, sometimes felt. Uneasy.

In his *Markings*³, Dag Hammarskjöld wrote this:

Uneasy, uneasy, uneasy —

Why?

Because — when opportunity gives you the obligation to create, you are content to meet the demands of the moment . . .

Because — anxious for the good opinion of others, and jealous of the possibility that they may become “famous,” you have lowered yourself to wondering what will happen in the end to what you have done and been. How dead can a man be behind a façade of great ability — and ambition! Bless your uneasiness as a sign that there is still life in you.

Surely you've felt uneasy. Does it mean, as the old theology says, we are fallen and already depraved — or does it mean that, when we feel that uneasiness, we're actually undergoing something that might exalt us?

Uneasy. To be human is to have this anxiety, to live with it.

It's when we question ourselves, — something only a human being can do — it's then that we know we still possess that most precious thing that will ever be ours — our humanity with the capacity to reflect, fully conscious. That is what it is to be a religious being, a moral being. To question yourself. To feel uneasy.

And we've got to *stay* uneasy. That is the high price of our consciousness, the condition of our continued ascent toward a magnificent human future, guided by a moral vision no other creature has, *a vision that must keep us uneasy*. A vision that can lead us to something we are not yet.

It's not enough to be supremely confident, not enough to affirm our human drives and passions, not enough to recognize the fallacy in the old theology's dim view of human beings.

Not enough without the moral vision that can be agonized by the barbarities of the past and the present, and imagine that which must be.

A strange amalgam of god and dust. We'll have to be conscious and maintain consciousness of both the god that we are and the dust that we are, and while giving the dust its due, at the end of the day, it is the dust that must bow to the god; it is the god that will fill the dust with glory.

³ *Markings*. Ballantine Books, 1982, p. 137.

READINGS

From two sermons by William Ellery Channing. First, from “The Moral Argument Against Calvinism,” 1809

Christianity, we all agree, is designed to manifest God as perfect benevolence, and to bring men to love and imitate him. Now is it probable, that a religion, having this object, gives views of the Supreme Being, from which our moral convictions and benevolent sentiments shrink with horror, and which, if made our pattern, would convert us into monsters? It is plain, that, were a human parent to . . . bring his children into life totally depraved, and then to pursue them with endless punishment, we should charge him with a cruelty not surpassed in the annals of the world; or, were a sovereign to incapacitate his subjects in any way whatever for obeying his laws, and then to torture them in dungeons of perpetual woe, we should say that history records no darker crime.

Second, from “Likeness to God preached in Providence in 1828.

The idea of God, sublime and {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. . . . Let [us] hold fast . . . a faith in the greatness of the human soul, that faith, which . . . 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. . . .

Ken Wilber, Up from Eden

If men and women are up from the beasts and on their way to the gods, they are in the meantime rather tragic figures. Poised between the two extremes, they are subjected to the most violent of conflicts. No longer beast, not yet god—or worse, half beast, half god: there is the soul of mankind. Put another way, humankind is an essentially tragic figure with a beautifully optimistic future—if they can survive the transition. . . .

The beasts are mortal, but they do not know or fully understand that fact; the gods are immortal, and they know it—but poor man, up from beasts and not yet a god, was that unhappy mixture: he was mortal, and he knew it. And the more he evolved, the more conscious he became of himself and his world, the more he grew in awareness and intelligence—the more he became conscious of his fate, his mortal and death-stained fate.

In short, there is a price to be paid for every increase in consciousness, and only that perspective, I believe, can place mankind’s evolutionary history in the proper context. Most of the accounts of man’s evolution err to one side or the other of that equation. They either overemphasize the growth aspect, seeing man’s evolution as nothing but a series of great advances and great leaps forward, thereby ignoring the fact that evolution is not a happy-go-lucky series of sweetness-and-light promotions, but a painful process of growth. Or they tend to the opposite direction and, seeing the agony and despair of mankind, look back nostalgically to that lost Eden of innocence, prior to self-consciousness, wherein man slumbered with the beasts in blissful ignorance. This view tends to see every evolutionary step out of Eden as being a crime. . . .

Each step in the evolutionary process was an advance, a growth experience, but it was bought at a high price—it demanded new responsibilities, and responsibilities that mankind did not always live up to . . .

—*Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution.*
New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981, pp. ix-x.