

THE LEVERAGE OF (NEW) TRUTH

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Preached at Channing Memorial Unitarian
Universalist Church, Newport

October 21, 2012

So now we're enduring another political campaign season, and in a political campaign season, the first casualty is truth. We aren't supposed to talk about the most critical issue we've ever faced -- climate change -- and instead they're both talking about more coal and more oil. Not to mention the majority of one party who think the President is actually a Kenyan Muslim -- and 24 percent of them, in one poll, think he's the Antichrist.

We might want to ask: What's truth, after all?

So today, a story about a time when, as now, the advance of human possibility was thwarted by some powerful public lies. Sometimes, faced with the tenacious force of a public lie, we get some intimation of the strength of Truth, and the great power of a new Truth dawning on human consciousness.



I want to recount such a moment in our own story. Now, I like to use the story of our own spiritual movement the way a Christian or a Jew uses the stories of the Bible — *our story tells us who we are*. How can we know who we are if you don't know our story?

And unlike the stories of premodern myth, we know *these* stories actually happened, because they happened not

THE READINGS

A letter from a slave-holding Methodist preacher in Virginia, addressed in 1851 to Mr. R.W. Emerson in Concord, Massachusetts:

About a year ago I commenced reading your writings. I have read them all and studied them sentence by sentence. I have shed many burning tears over them; because you gain my assent to Laws which, when I see how they would act on the affairs of life, I have not the courage to practise. . . .

Moncure Daniel Conway. *Autobiography: Memories and Experiences*. 2 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904. I:109,114.

And from a sermon by Jenkin Lloyd Jones at All Souls Church in Chicago, 1905:

There is a pre-vision that belongs to the faithful heart, a foresight that is born of insight; there is a light of heaven blazing up from within in every soul, and the greater the soul the clearer is the light. . . . The hopeful may . . . be mistaken, but the fact remains that the timid, the faithless, those who are afraid of innovations, whose persistent plea is to tradition and precedent, and who distrust the validity of all lamps except the flickering, smoking, and oftentimes dying lamp of their own experience, — in short, the faithless, — necessarily part company with the . . . more forceful leaders of the world. . . . Those whom the ages unite in calling prophets are . . . they who are buoyed by a faith in the future that seems unwarranted by the facts of the present.

Prophecy calls for sweat and self denial; it summons us to uphill tasks, bids us to die trying.

Do you ask for the sources of prophecy, the spring out of which flow the promises of life that so sustain the soul? The sources of all springs are subterranean. No one can trace the river to its beginnings . . .

Prophecy is the unconscious witness of uninvested energy; it is the expression of that potency of the universe back of all our plannings, behind all our arguments, greater than all our schemes.

There is a gravitation of soul as of the atom. . . . There are tides, fixed currents and gulf streams in the ocean of soul as in the waters of the deep, . . . prophetic visions in the realm of spirit . . .

Prophecy witnesses to a divine potency in the universe, the coiled spring at the core of things. Prophecy is not mere longing; it is striving. . . . Prophecy is energetic, executive, initiative. There is an element of divine audacity in prophecy. They are the children of God who, fearless of consequences, plunge forward, who take up hard tasks, who break with convention and grapple with the ideal; who dare launch forth in the interest of untried verities, forming new runlets in the tissues of brain for the currents of life to run in. . . .

that long ago and not that far away.

The public lie was about *slavery*. Slavery in America was a Southern institution but the whole nation was in thrall to it. The few real foes of slavery in the United States Congress were ridiculed and shouted down as shrill-voiced radicals. Among those at the intellectual center of this greatly outnumbered Abolitionist movement were, as you must know, our own Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, and those who gathered around them.

But in an effort to maintain peace, the Congress had virtually agreed not to allow any debate about slavery. A shameless *Unitarian* president, Millard Fillmore, signed the Fugitive Slave Act into law, forcing the recapture of escaped slaves and their return to the South.

And we really ought to ask: — What was the role of *religion* in this time?

First Channing himself, and then Emerson, and Theodore Parker, and their Transcendentalist circle, along with some Quakers and some anti-Calvinist evangelical Christian followers of the evangelist Charles Finney, formed a vocal religious minority against the evil. From the rest of the pulpits, an ear-shattering silence, or outright support for slavery. The Catholic church told its followers to obey authority — in the form of the Fugitive Slave Law. The Calvinists found some mysterious divine purpose in slavery, or maybe some divine punishment. And throughout the South, ways were found — it wasn't so hard, after all — to show that the Bible actually supported slavery, to show that abolitionism itself was the sin.

There was, in Virginia, a powerful slave-holding Methodist preacher named Moncure Daniel Conway. He, too, preached this mularkey. For awhile he believed a new idea worked out between some handy theologians and some handy scientists that proposed separate divine acts of creation for the separate races. The difference between them was that

the *white ones had souls*.

Now, throughout the North, nobody believed in this bizarre multiple-creation theory. *In theory*, they thought slavery a bad thing — *but not their concern*. They couldn't see what it had to do with religion.

Meanwhile, in the South, Southern postmasters were expected to burn any literature from northern Abolitionists that might pass through their post offices.



And so I want you to note a piece of mail that somehow made it through. Why, after all, would a postmaster in Safford County, Virginia, question a letter from a member of the county's most powerful family — from Rev. Moncure Conway? Although — the postmaster might have wondered why it was addressed to the notorious Mr. R. W. Emerson in Concord, Massachusetts.

Quite simply, Rev. Conway wrote:

I will here take the liberty of saying what nothing but a concern as deep as Eternity should make me say. I am a minister of the Christian Religion, — the only way for the world to reenter Paradise, in my earnest belief. I have just commenced that office at the call of the Holy Ghost, now in my twentieth year. About a year ago I commenced reading your writings. I have read them all and studied them sentence by sentence. I have shed many burning tears over them; because you gain my assent to Laws which, when I see how they would act on the affairs of life, I have not courage to practise. . . .¹

I was gripped by that letter even before I knew the rest. But *three years later*, two neighbors of Rev. Conway showed up in Boston. He knew them both. One was a Captain Suttle, a well-respected Virginia politician and *slaveholder*. The other was his escaped slave Anthony Burns. Anthony Burns had escaped to Boston, and then he'd been captured under the Fugitive Slave Law and held at the Suf-

¹ Moncure Daniel Conway. *Autobiography: Memories and Experiences*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company/Riverside, 1904, vol. I, pp. 109f.

folk County Courthouse in Boston, which had been taken over by the federal government to serve as a jail for escaped slaves. Charles Suttle, his owner, came to Boston to demand his return in a kind of mockery of American justice that they called a hearing rather than a trial because the accused wasn't permitted to speak and was automatically guilty. The affair was presided over by a *United States Fugitive Slave Commissioner*.

Now, under a federal order, Boston was forced to use its Court House, the court house of a free people in a free state, as a prison for a man who, under Massachusetts law, should be a free man, but he was being held as property.

Seven or eight blocks away at Fanueil Hall, that hall that's been called the "cradle of liberty," five thousand people gathered to hear Theodore Parker challenge the crowd to go down to the court house, immediately, storm it, and forcibly rescue Anthony Burns. Among them was a young Harvard divinity student who had recently been torn away from his old life by the powerful leverage of Truth and had enrolled at Harvard — the same Moncure Daniel Conway of Safford County, Virginia. I managed to get hold of a copy of his autobiography, where he writes:

The Southern students at Cambridge assembled to offer their sympathy to the owner of Burns. I was notified, but replied that my sympathies were with the fugitive.²

But his mind hadn't been completely settled yet, so he'd gone to an abolitionist rally and heard Henry Thoreau. He heard a Unitarian minister who had a facial injury he had just received in that failed attempt to rescue Anthony Burns from the courthouse. At the same rally — in his words:

A very aged negro woman named "Sojourner Truth," lank, shrivelled, but picturesque, slowly mounted to the platform, amid general applause, and sat silently listening to the speeches.

Conway watched that scene, where the

² Conway, *Autobiography*, I, p. 175.

Quaker abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison had just burned the Constitution because it sanctions slavery. And now Garrison invited a young Southern heckler to come to the stage to speak his mind. Here's how Conway describes it:

The young man complied, and in the course of his defence of slavery and affirming his sincerity, twice exclaimed, "As God is my witness!" [From across the stage Sojourner Truth cried:] "Young man," cried Sojourner Truth, "I don't believe God Almighty ever hearn tell of you!" Her shrill voice sounded through the grove like a bugle . . .³



I found Moncure Conway again, in Concord, a regular visitor and trusted friend of the Emersons. In Boston, at Theodore Parker's side. And then in Washington, D.C. as minister at the First Unitarian Church, where his preaching drove the spineless Millard Fillmore — who as president had signed the Fugitive Slave Act into law — to abandon his specially-cushioned pew and his membership. When Moncure Conway learned that the Union Army had taken his hometown, I found him leading the family's sixty slaves on a harrowing journey to freedom in the North.



His calling and destiny exacted a price, wrenching him away from hearth and home and inheritance. And the cost went beyond Moncure Conway himself.

By and large, the women of the South had a lot less love of this system that enslaved people than their husbands. These enslaved people had become part of their households and they had come to care for them and respect them; but women had no voice. There were, among the wives of slaveholders, some who wept when a family was broken up forever by the sale to separate buyers of various family members. It was these women who cared enough, and dared enough, to violate the laws against teaching slaves to read. And

³ Conway, *Autobiography*, I, 184.

Moncure Conway's own mother was one of those whose soul would be tried in the balance of the higher law that had overtaken her son. After the War began, Margaret Conway, too, left home, left her husband and her inheritance, moved North, joining both her son and the abolitionist movement.



But the story doesn't stop there; something else happened that week in Boston when Anthony Burns went to trial. Our Unitarian forebears had hardly been exemplary during the crisis. As one of the Transcendentalists [OBF] — who happened to be the son of one of the pillars of the cautious, stodgy, old Unitarianism put it:

the Abolitionists were poor, humble, despised people, of no influence; [people] one could not ask to dine, who were not respected.⁴

No, it was respectable people who sat in Unitarian pews, including merchants who were emassing wealth from the slave trade and whose mills and ships relied on Southern cotton.

It was during this time that Theodore Parker frequently came into conflict with the minister of the old Federal-Street Church, *Dr. Ezra Stiles Gannett*. It was to that church that many of the wealthy and powerful retreated on Sunday mornings, to be reassured and comforted. Among its members was George Ticknor Curtis, the federal fugitive slave commissioner. You see what that meant. Parker had, in his congregation, former slaves who had somehow escaped and made their way to Boston. And so in one particularly dramatic Unitarian minister's meeting, Theodore Parker confronted Dr. Gannett with the fact that Dr. Gannett had been urging a member of his, Gannett's, church to kidnap members of Parker's. He was talking about Fugitive Slave Commissioner Curtis whose job was to

capture escaped slaves and send them back to their owners.

And now comes Anniversary Week, something like our modernday General Assembly, so everybody in Boston, it seems, has house-guests. And Dr. Gannett has one, a Unitarian minister named John Parkman, come for the annual ministers' meeting, but Dr. Gannett doesn't seem to know that his guest is a member of Theodore Parker's Vigilance Committee, a group that stages daring rescues of fugitive slaves.

A curious thing happened this week. This was the week Anthony Burns was arrested in his Boston home held at the Court House.

And Dr. Gannett's house-guest, Rev. Parkman, skipped the ministers' meetings to attend Anthony Burns' trial. The first couple of days he'd come back to the Gannett home and express his outrage over what was going on, and wind up in an argument with Dr. Gannett, just home from the ministers' meetings, who would respond with adamant defenses of the slave system, even calling the Abolitionist movement "the hellish spirit alive and active here in our very midst, even in New England."⁵

Dr. Gannett's daughter asked him what he would do if a fugitive slave came to his door, and he replied that he would send the fugitive slave away unaided and unsheltered rather than break one of this nation's laws.

Maybe you can imagine the tension. The arguments were getting ugly and finally John Parkman asked that the topic be discussed no more. He simply couldn't bear to hear his good and even great host utter such inexplicable idiocy.

For three days an awkward kind of calm held. Then came Friday, a day of infamy. It was the day Anthony Burns, manacled and chained and surrounded by hundreds of federal soldiers, was led through the streets of Boston past an unbelieving crowd who shouted

⁴ *Boston Unitarianism 1820-1850, A Study of the Life and Work of Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1890, p. 197.

⁵ William C. Gannett. *Ezra Stiles Gannett, Unitarian Minister in Boston, 1824-1871*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1875, p. 286f.

their protests and hung black crepe, and was delivered finally to a ship in Boston Harbor that would return him to Virginia.

Rev. Parkman saw all this, this day of infamy, and returned to the Gannett home.

For what happened then I'll give you John Parkman's own words, from a letter he wrote to Ezra Stiles Gannett's son, a who had become a Transcendentalist:

On the day when Burns was given up, the first person whom I met on entering his house was Dr. Gannett. 'Is it true that he has been surrendered?' he asked. . . . On my replying, 'Yes,' he threw himself into a chair, buried his face in his hands, and then, in a voice broken by sobbing, burst out, 'O God, forgive this guilty nation! What will become of us?'⁶

Dr. Gannett had had a conversion. He had felt the powerful leverage of truth, and for his time, a *new* truth, and it had turned him around.

Now his daughter just had to ask her question again: What would he do if a fugitive came to his door. "I have thought about that," he told her. "I should shelter him and aid him to go further on to Canada, and then I should go and give myself up to prison." He had felt the persistent leverage of truth and it had implicated him very personally.

Dr. Gannett didn't do *anything* at first. That Sunday he preached the sermon he'd already planned.

But after a few weeks he took to the pulpit and delivered a sermon called *Relation of the North to Slavery*. It was an amazing day at Federal-Street Church. The old conservative Dr. Gannett did an utterly courageous thing.

What he said drew the attention of Slave Commissioner Curtis, who sat in his pew glowering and sour-faced that Sunday morning — sat there glowering. And now Slave Commissioner Curtis grew bitter, attacked Dr. Gannett in pamphlets, even managed the desperate presidential campaign of Daniel

6 W.C. Gannett, *Gannett*, 1875, pp. 288ff.

Webster, who, in hopes of winning the presidency, had thrown his great weight behind the Fugitive Slave Bill.



But my story is not really about Commissioner Curtis or Rev. Gannett or Moncure Conway.

It *is* about the Leverage, in this world, of Truth, and of a new Truth when it confronts human consciousness. It's about what it means for us when Truth implicates us personally.

What was happening within Moncure Conway, within Dr. Gannett, was happening within others. Visiting Concord to tell the good Mr. Emerson how deeply Emerson's writings had transformed his life, Conway was told, "When the mind has reached a certain stage it may be sometimes crystallized by a slight touch." The Truth was in the air and, one by one, a growing multitude came to see it.

I don't mean the kind of "truth" people mean when they use that incomprehensible expression "what's true for me" and "what's true for you" as if there really isn't any such thing as Truth at all.

And I don't mean truth the way the old systems of unquestioned religion and myth mean it when they say *this is true because it's true and to hell with the evidence*.

I mean Truth in the way Emerson meant when he said,

The truth is in the air, and the most [sensitive] brain will announce it first, but all will announce it . . . later. . . . [The mind of the morally sensitive person] is righter than others, because he yields to a current so feeble [subtle] as can be felt only by a needle delicately poised.⁷

Moncure Conway — and along with him many others — was finding his way to truth, whose glow appeared ever more clearly before him; even as it's always there before us, even if it takes us awhile and some struggle to

7 RWE, "Fate." In Library of America edition of *Essays and Lectures*, p. 965.

find our way there. And he knew it couldn't be long until that Truth would ring true with many others, who would join him. It unfolds in a moment of history; it reveals itself within the stream of time when someone, somewhere, ventures forward where no one has ever been.



What greater document is there than the one that declares “We hold *these truths* to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”? Yet already you could rephrase it just a bit and it would be even more true. All *men*? And indeed, only men could vote until 1920. But finally the leverage of Truth expanded the Founders' grasp of the Truth of those words. But these words are immortal.

The force of those words was greater than its 56 signers knew. And even after civil war and struggle to reach beyond outmoded notions of truth that had enslaved millions, outmoded ideas that many took to be the purpose of God as revealed in Scripture — still, a full century later, it didn't yet mean you could vote in Mississippi.

Such Truth has no leverage *in the abstract*. You find its meaning in action, in the stance you take toward life, or it's finally lost to you. In action it grows, deepens, and extends into new realms.

Truth of this kind **sings**. Just as a great Truth was gripping Moncure Conway, many of the hymns in our hymnal were being writ-

ten. James Russell Lowell was writing our first hymn today, and he was writing this:

*Though the cause of evil prosper, yet 'tis
truth alone is strong;
Though its portion be a scaffold, and
upon the throne be wrong.
Yet that scaffold sways the future.
New occasions teach new duties, time
makes ancient good uncouth.
They must upward still and onward
who would keep abreast of truth.*

And such Truth **commands**. That's why why the fourth section of Eric Erikson's biography of Gandhi is called “The Leverage of Truth.”⁸

Emerson once asked,
Where shall I hear words such as in elder
ages drew men to leave all and follow,—fa-
ther and mother, house and land, wife and
child? Where shall I hear these august laws
and moral being so pronounced, as to fill my
ear, and I feel ennobled by the offer of my
utmost action and passion? The test of
the true faith, certainly, should be its power
to charm and command the soul.⁹

The truth is before us, and it calls to us,
and new Truth reveals itself at the frontiers of
our advancing journey.

And if we will listen attentively, and if we
dare to advance toward it, leave what must be
left behind to answer to its command, we may
feel rising about us, from out of us, a bold new
sphere of values, a realm of grand possibility,
a new order grander and fairer than ever was
before. It calls, it beckons, it commands.

8 Erik H. Erikson. *Gandhi's Truth*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1969, pp. 411ff.

9 *Divinity School Address*, 1838.