

Taking the Heart Road  
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Jesus took a road he knew he had to take. That road wasn't just the road into Jerusalem on his way to celebrate Passover, that was sure to end in his death. No, Jesus had determined his path way before that fateful trip to Jerusalem. His feet were pointed in a certain direction when he started to speak out and speak up, when he first challenged the religious leaders and the Roman rulers, when he first told the sick and the rejected, the outcast and the oppressed that they too were loved.

Let me tell you another story of a man who took a road with an outcome he never imagined. I don't know how much you know about Unitarian history in this country, but it begins with a pamphlet war. You may recall that pamphlet wars were a way to have a lengthy, extended argument or discussion, a way to defend or attack different ideas and opinions. They were quite popular as the colonies moved towards revolution and continued to have a role as the new country formed a constitution.

The Unitarian pamphlet wars began with Orthodox Christians arguing with their more liberal siblings about the singular or trinitarian nature of God. It grew from there to bring into question the nature of Jesus (divine or human or both) as well as the nature of humans (were humans inherently good or tainted with original sin). Even the nature of the Bible was questioned- was it the sole basis for religious knowledge or, as the liberals argued, were science and reason and conscience also needed?

Well, William Ellery Channing was in the thick of these pamphlet wars. Channing saw himself as a liberal Christian and so he did not like being called a Unitarian, the insult the more orthodox Christians called him and his liberal colleagues. By 1812, Channing was the leader of the Boston liberals. He preached about a loving God, a God who "endowed humanity with innate goodness, rationality, and the wisdom to discern between good and evil." His popularity grew and so did the ideas upon which he preached.

When William Ellery Channing left Boston one early morning in 1819, on his way to Baltimore, Maryland, his mind was on the sermon he would give later in the week at the ordination of Jared Sparks. He wasn't thinking at all, nor did he even have a hint, of how this trip would change everything.

In one way, when Channing set out that day on his handsome but sturdy horse, he was going to New York and then Baltimore. A simple journey. He would preach his sermon on Unitarian Christianity and then return home. But in another way the events that were set in motion that day led to this very moment, right here, right now.

On his way to Baltimore, Channing stopped to visit his sister Lucy Channing Russel in New York. She was very enthusiastic about her brother and his ideas and so she invited a group of her friends to come hear him talk. When he returned from Baltimore three days later, people were already talking about his sermon and suddenly he found himself

quite famous. The small group of 40 that he originally spoke to grew to hundreds so that he preached three times in one day in the largest space available at that time. And hundreds more people were turned away!

Only a few months later, on November 15, 1819, the First Congregational Church was founded. That church is now known as All Souls. More than a church was founded that day, but also a religion, one that said God was one, a unity and not a trinity, one that said human beings were ultimately good, and one that said the Bible was not to be read literally. Because of Channing's courage and his preaching there is not only the Unitarian Church of All Souls but also over one thousand other congregations including this one right here.

On that day over 200 years ago, William Ellery Channing, set out to preach a sermon with no idea, not even the smallest inkling, that one congregation, let alone more than a thousand of them, and a whole new religion would come of it. He knew he had to claim and proclaim his liberal beliefs. He knew he had a message that people needed to hear, longed to hear. But he couldn't see the future.

The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating, wrote the futurist John Schaar. As we sit together in this space, I can't but help think about what the future we- this country- are creating. This past week, Alabama passed an extreme slate of bills, like bills in other states, that criminalizes healthcare for trans children and teens and that prohibits discussion about LGBTQI or gender identity issues in elementary classrooms. One of the bills bars transgender students from using bathrooms that align with their identities.

In Oklahoma, lawmakers approved a near total ban on abortion. Across the country, state legislatures are advancing restrictions on women's right to healthcare and the right to choose as the Supreme Court considers striking down *Roe v Wade*. In Texas, a woman was charged with murder after she allegedly performed a self-induced abortion.

And this week Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson was confirmed as the first Black Woman Justice to the Supreme Court. While a significant milestone for this country, we were witness to her record on the bench being mischaracterized, her being accused of supporting terrorists, and that she was soft on crime or child pornographers. Some of the questions asked diminished the process and attempted to diminish her. Further was the disrespect of those who voted against her filing out of the Senate Chamber as the vote confirming her was read and she was applauded by her supporters.

So, let me ask you, what if we actually made plans now for a different future, a future that we want to live in? A future where everyone is treated with fairness and respect and love? What if we pushed aside our doubts and fears and dark thoughts and chose a different path than the ones the politicians are putting forth? What if we took our creativity and our dreams, our hopes and our aspirations and put them into motion now?

I don't know what Jesus was thinking that first time he reached out to the tax collector or prostitute or the person with leprosy. I do know he chose to be inclusive and open to all kinds of people. I do know he chose to be loving, accepting each person in their fullness, in all their beautiful humanity. I do know he chose love over hate. He chose love over turning his back to those already feeling rejected and lost and alone. He chose the heart road even as it was a hard road, even as he at some point knew he would die for it.

William Ellery Channing took a heart journey too. He chose to claim his identity as a Unitarian and to put forth the radical ideas of unity, of love, of conscience and reason. He never had the clarity of a plan or the foresight to see what the future would bring, but he had the courage and the character to live his beliefs and by doing so, well, here we are.

What if we intentionally made different decisions that led us on a heart journey that two hundred years from now people would look back and say that is when poverty ended, that is when all children had food in their bellies, that is when prisoners were released, that is when trans and LGBTQI people were affirmed, that is when white supremacy culture finally ended, that is when we said no to big oil and other big money in politics, that is when all humans were treated with worth and dignity. What if?

Every journey begins with that first movement forward, that first bit of courage to live into the beliefs we hold dear. And it begins with one person at a time. So, if we want a different future, it begins this way- radical, unstoppable, all-encompassing love. Let me be clear, this is not a pretty slogan but a truth in action. People *not* welcome out there- the children who think and act differently than others, the trans or gay teens, the poor and hungry, the people with mental struggles, people of color, women who are abused or in need of health services, the immigrants and refugees. These people are under attack and we cannot, we shall not watch a future we do not want unfold before our very eyes.

This heart journey begins with love and letting go of our fears and our doubts and our judgments and our comfort. And it will be a journey of discovering what you do best, how you can make a difference. Your best may be saying hello to each person you see. It could be writing letters to the editor. It could be a scientific discovery or arguing a case in court. It could be speaking out in class for someone who can't or speaking up in a meeting when a microaggression happens. It could be challenging the way things are in an institution such as school or work or even here. It could be challenging the leaders at a Council or a Board of Ed meeting. Listen to your heart and you will know.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. The congregation I served in Plainfield was down the block and around the corner from a mental health halfway house. The people that lived there were not ill enough to be hospitalized but nor were they well enough to live at home. So, like I said, the halfway house was close to the church and so many of the folks there found their way through our doors. At first, the response was what is going on here? Should we lock the door during the service or not let certain people in? But our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person and our mission to be radically inclusive overrode our doubt and fears. A mental health nurse and I worked to

create a way for all people to be welcome through the doors of the church. We created covenants and partnerships with each of the residents of the halfway house that found us that way each vulnerable person knew what was expected (they couldn't act out during the service) and they knew at least one person in the congregation who could help them navigate a church service and fellowship hour. Every person was able to be included in our congregation not only with managing *their* behavior, but with managing the expectations, doubts, and fears of the members of the congregation. We need to do this kind of work in every one of our congregations.

The journey begins with the heart, but then can reach beyond a few people to create something totally new and unexpected. Remember, Channing didn't start out to create a new religion, and we do not have to start out being 100% clear in our minds the new thing we wish to create. By starting with radical love, radical inclusivity we do not know where it will take us in the future, but we do know it can challenge a white supremacy culture. White Supremacy is sustained by institutions but also by fear and hatred. Martin Luther King Jr said, Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Our light is radical love. Our light is challenging the status quo. Our light is opening new doors and trying new things.

When my father was a diplomat, he was given a big job to do. He was given the name of a big corporation that could help him get the job done. But my dad wanted to see if there were other options and he found a much smaller company, with only five Muslim employees, that could do the job well with less cost because the owner knew the community. Within a few years, that company grew to five hundred employees, all from that town and the surrounding area. And, here is the amazing thing, the owner took his profits and instead of putting the money in the bank he put it back into the community. He built a hospital and a school and a mosque in his town. And the town grew and became an important port city for ships around the world.

A different future is up to us. We cannot control it or predict it. We do not have a crystal ball or super powers. Nevertheless, the future will most definitely be influenced by the choices we make, by the courage we wake, by the chances we take, and by the convictions we stake.

The future is not some place we are going, but one we are actively creating. Right now, right this very minute. Amen.