

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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I hope you enjoyed the All Souls choir's magnificent performance of the Trent Johnson composition "School Prayer" as much as I did. Accompanied by the composer himself, and conducted by Alejandro Hernandez-Valdez, the composition is set to a text by the contemporary American poet Diane Ackerman. One reason I enjoyed the performance so much is that I inadvertently chose the text.

Last fall, with the much-delayed celebration of my 25 years of ministry at All Souls in distant view, our associate minister Audette Fulbright approached me and asked me if I would give her a very specific Christmas gift. "I'd like a small collection of your favorite poems by women poets," she said. She referred to the central place that poetry has in my spirituality and ministry, and said she would like to benefit from my extensive and carefully-curated catalog of favorite poems. Intrigued by her request, and not at all suspicious of an ulterior motive, I agreed to do as she asked.

As it turns out, the request was mostly subterfuge. Audette immediately gave the collection to Trent, who selected the Ackerman poem as the basis of his choral composition in honor of my 25 years of ministry at All Souls.

Trent chose well. The Ackerman poem is one of my very favorite poems. This morning, I would like to tell you why.

As many of you know, I grew up Conservative Mennonite. In addition to being culturally behind the times by several decades, Conservative Mennonites look to an ancient revelation as the source of our most trustworthy knowledge concerning what to believe and how to live. Scripture trumps science, and revelation trumps reason when it comes to deciding the most important things in life.

During my mid-twenties, I was preparing to become a Mennonite minister like my father, my maternal grandfather, six of my ten uncles, and two dozen or so of my first cousins or their spouses. Along the way, it became increasingly clear to me that I couldn't serve two masters if I ended up in the ministry. The biblically-literalist doctrinal commitments of the church (belief in a supernatural God, an inerrant scripture, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and so on) often contradicted the laws of nature as articulated by science and reason. I couldn't preach one thing and believe another.

So, in my late twenties, I left the Mennonite Church. I left because I didn't want to live with my eyes closed and my mind made up. I didn't want to base my life on an ancient and outmoded source of authority. I wanted to open myself to discover meaning in what I learned from my own experience.

While I did feel a deep sense of loss at all I was leaving behind, I ultimately felt I had no choice but to leave. The disparity between the Conservative Mennonite view of how the world really is, which came from their idea of God, and my emerging view of how the world really is, which came from human reason and experience, ultimately led me to go off on my own.

At the outset, despite the losses I had incurred, I found the experience of being on my own exhilarating, and also disorienting. Freedom, I came to learn, isn't initially a new sense of direction. Rather, it's the absence of something holding us back. As Janice Joplin sings, voicing Kris Kristofferson's haunting refrain, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

As I made the transition from Mennonite to something else, I could easily have lost my way. For the first time in my life, I had no rules to follow, and no one would correct me if I went astray. I could do whatever I wanted during church times on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening. I could watch whatever I wanted on television — and even go to the movies. I could listen to whatever music I wanted — and even go dancing. Instead of living apart from "the world," I became an active and engaged part of it.

By the time many young people leave home, they are happy to be gone from their parents' home. They are also often vehemently clear about the ways they don't want to be like their parents — the kind of neighborhood they don't want to live in, the kind of furniture they don't want to buy, the kind of food they don't want to eat. They soon learn, however, that the freedom to live anywhere you want doesn't mean you don't eventually have to choose one particular place to call home. You have to furnish it with one particular assortment of furniture.

After I left the religious world of my upbringing, I faced a spiritual version of this dilemma. I no longer had to follow my parents' way of life. I could do whatever I wished. But I couldn't do everything. I had to choose a particular path for myself, based on commitments I decided to make and goals I chose to pursue. I needed a new source of authority in my life, one that provided a more substantial foundation for living than my own limited knowledge and perspective, but one that was directly relevant to my own experience.

After a half-dozen years of meandering about on my own, I wandered into the Unitarian Church in Princeton one Sunday morning. Three years later, I ended up at All Souls as one of your ministers.

When this congregation's first sanctuary was dedicated in 1821, the preacher at the occasion, the Rev. Edward Everett, warned:

You are dedicating a place of worship to the support of views of revealed truth [which are] different, in some important points, from those of the respectable community in which you live; not extensively understood by your neighbors.... Under these circumstances, it is impossible that you

should not be the objects of prejudices, of the unfavorable opinions, of the opposition, with which whatever is new is apt to be regarded.

“Whatever is new,” in this case, was the Enlightenment idea that reason should trump scripture. This congregation was founded in the wake of a famous sermon preached in 1819 by William Ellery Channing, who argued that Jesus was a great prophet and teacher, but not divine, not the son of God.

In doctrinal terms, Channing was taking issue with the Trinitarian formula used by Jesus in the Gospels. When Jesus baptized his disciples and sent them out into the world, he did so by saying, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.” That was the basis of their authority for doing their work. The formula remains pervasively present in the Christian tradition to this day, and its presence continually reinforces Christian loyalty to its ancient source of authority.

To be sure, Channing still understood himself as Christian, even though he rejected the divinity of Jesus. Over time, however, it became apparent that the entire doctrinal superstructure of the Christian tradition requires a supernatural savior. If you’re not going to accept the Bible as the ultimate source of authority, you eventually need to find something else.

Half a century after Channing’s sermon, the poet Emily Dickinson raised a different standard of authority. One of my favorite Dickinson poems consists of only 15 words set in three lines. She writes:

In the name of the Bee –
And of the Butterfly –
And of the Breeze – Amen!

Like Channing’s sermon, this poem is deeply subversive of traditional Christianity — but it’s even more blasphemous. Exercising unbelievable courage for a woman in the mid-19th century, Dickinson sets aside the Trinitarian God and puts the natural world in its place. Henceforth, she says, wisdom and even salvation will come not from God above you, but from the natural world around you. The gift of life comes to us not in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but in the name of the bee, and the butterfly, and the breeze, and the world we share with them. We are both in this world and of this world.

But we also have work to do in this world, and Dickinson sends us out into the world in much the same way that Jesus sent his disciples out — except Dickinson’s source of authority is different. She chooses the bee, the butterfly, and the breeze because they parallel the divine roles contained in the Christian formula: the ruling father, the redeeming son, and the ever-present spirit. For her part, Dickinson baptizes her readers and sends us out into the world with a similar mandate, but from a different source. Like the bee, we are to convey the sting of nature’s authority. Like the butterfly,

we are to convey nature's capacity for transformation. Like the breeze, we are to convey nature's restless presence.

Set against this doctrinal and poetic backdrop, Diane Ackerman's poem "School Prayer" extends the scope of Dickinson's claim and defines its commitment. While I don't know whether Ackerman grew up repeating the Trinitarian formula in prayers at school, her instinct for redirecting our source of authority is unerring. Her study of the natural world has been disciplined (she wrote her PhD dissertation at Cornell under the guidance of astrophysicist Carl Sagan) and her exposition of it beautifully rendered, as demonstrated by her books *The Natural History of the Senses* and most recently *The Human Age*, among others.

In her poem, Ackerman signposts her claim that our experience of the natural world both grounds us as our source of authority and guides us as our source of moral clarity. She writes:

In the name of the daybreak
and the eyelids of morning
and the wayfaring moon
and the night when it departs,

I swear I will not dishonor
my soul with hatred,
but offer myself humbly
as a guardian of nature,
as a healer of misery,
as a messenger of wonder,
as an architect of peace.

In the name of the sun and its mirrors
and the day that embraces it
and the cloud veils drawn over it
and the uttermost night
and the male and the female
and the plants bursting with seed
and the crowning seasons
of the firefly and the apple,

I will honor all life
— wherever and in whatever form
it may dwell — on Earth my home,
and in the mansions of the stars.

Both as a poem and as a life plan, it doesn't get any better than this. I will honor all life — as a guardian of nature, as a healer of misery, as a messenger of wonder, as an architect of peace. As Jesus once said in a somewhat different context, do these things, and you will inherit life everlasting.