

Wild Geese, by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good. □ You do not have to walk on your knees □ for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. □ You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. □ Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. □ Meanwhile the world goes on. □ Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain □ are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, □ the mountains and the rivers. □ Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, □ are heading home again. □ Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, □ the world offers itself to your imagination, □ calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting- □ over and over announcing your place □ in the family of things.

William Ellery Channing Meets Lady Gaga

Rev. Sarah Schurr

I was visiting a Jewish synagogue once, attending the Sabbath service, and I heard the most amazing prayer. It began. “Thank you God for returning my soul to me, for it is a good soul” I just loved that prayer – celebrating that we have a good soul and knowing that God made us all that way. How lovely and how affirming. It sat in stark contrast to the idea of “Original Sin” that some folks carry around. I remember once going to the baptism of a little baby and being struck with all the language about washing away his sins. I wondered about his tiny sins. He was only a month old. He hadn’t had time to do much sinning yet. Please know I am not trying to show disrespect to the sacrament of baptism or those who treasure it, but I am holding up an idea. They meant Original sin, of course. Nothing he had done that was wrong. Original sin, contrary to popular belief, has nothing to do with sex. It is the idea that we all have to bear the burden of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Some folks say that blemish on the human record is the baggage humanity has to carry forever. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all have the story of Adam and Eve, but different religious groups, and different individuals within those groups have chosen to carry forth different lessons from it. Some emphasize the beauty of creation, some the love of a creator, and some emphasize the fall of humanity. If you look at the world’s religions, they all have a slightly different take on the nature of human beings, at the most essential level. Are

we humans good? Are we evil? How are we redeemed when we go off the right path? How do we go astray? What do we need to do in order to live a good life? In fact, when we have our feedback time after I talk, I would love to hear your ideas on the basic nature of human beings. It is one of the big questions of religious thinkers through time.

And it is not just churches that deal with this issue. Plato, Hobbs, Locke, Hume... Many great philosophers have written about their view of the nature of humanity. It is a deep philosophical question. Are people – at their core – good or evil? For instance, Hobbs and Machiavelli both saw human beings as basically selfish and driven by self interest. In his work, *The Leviathan*, Hobbs said, “The condition man is of war - of war against everyone.” He has some issues, I think. Nicholas of Cusa, on the other hand, believed that people were of good character and advocated democracy in the organization of society. Locke referred to humans as the “Noble Savage”, capable of being molded into better folks by a good society but capable of being turned to ill by bad leadership. So for Locke, we were products of our environment and could be turned toward good or evil by the kind of leadership that shapes our behavior.

Being a minister, I think of this as a major religious question, the nature of humanity. But many say that I think of everything as a religious question. Our Unitarian Universalist theologians throughout history have not ignored this issue of the nature of humanity. Our Universalist ancestors believed that everyone would eventually go to heaven after they died. No one would be resigned to everlasting damnation. But this was actually more because they believed that God was really forgiving than that they believed that people were so really good. They knew that people were prone to behave badly sometimes. Our Unitarian ancestors were so not convinced that everyone was good. They tended to be a rather elitist and judgmental group. Perhaps they just thought they were good. There is an old joke the Universalists believed that God was too good to damn them to hell and the Unitarians believed they were too good to be damned. I think when the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1962, we didn't quite resolve that split entirely.

Enter William Ellery Channing, a really big name in our UU history. He was an old school Bostonian in the 19th century. Channing was a prominent and well-respected minister in Boston who was made pastor of the Federal Street Church 1803. Unitarianism as a religion and a philosophy

had existed in Europe for hundreds of years, but at that time all the liberal churches in America, including those who later became UU, were Congregational churches. They evolved from Standing Order churches created by our founding fathers. Now, there was some diversity among the different beliefs in the Congregational Church, especially among the ministers. Mostly, it was kept down to a dull roar. But in 1819, it all came into the light and Unitarianism exploded onto the scene. Rev. William Ellery Channing gave a famous sermon at the ordination of Jered Sparks that changed the history of our movement. It was called “Unitarian Christianity”. This sermon got him ousted from many of the clergy gatherings in Boston and made him a leader in what became modern American Unitarianism. You might say that Channing “came out” as a Unitarian. He declared himself to be a liberal Christian who believed that Jesus was a very special man who is an inspiration and model for us all. But Jesus was not a part of or equal to the creator God. That was radical enough. He told the people that reason was good and it was a gift that would lead humanity to greater goodness and wisdom. But Channing went on to make another really important and radical point in a speech in 1828 called “Likeness to God”. Channing preached from the Bible every week, as was common for Unitarians at that time. Channing reminded folks that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. Channing went on to say that he took that to mean that since God is good, we are made good as well. He said we were made good, in God’s image, from the very beginning. Humans are not destined to carry that burden of original sin, but can feel secure in the knowledge that they were created good on the day they are born. This radical message of inherent human goodness among all people has been vital to our Unitarian theology ever since. It is a pretty big deal.

Now fast forward to the Academy Awards ceremony in 2011. How many of you watch the Oscars? I thought the hosts were a kind of boring that year. They were Anne Hathaway and that guy from the Spider Man movies. As usual, there were some nice dresses. But one thing really stood out for me. It was the performance by pop singer who goes by the name of Lady Gaga. I had not been a huge fan of Lady Gaga up to that point. She just looked like a rerun of Madonna to me – I’m too old I guess. But Lady Gaga came on stage, climbed out of this spaceship looking thing, and sang her brand new song...

My mama told me when I was young

We are all born superstars
She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on
In the glass of her boudoir

"There's nothing wrong with loving who you are"
She said, "'Cause he made you perfect, babe"
"So hold your head up girl and you'll go far,
Listen to me when I say"
"I'm beautiful in my way
Cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track Baby,
I was born this way
Don't hide yourself in regret
Just love yourself and your set
I'm on the right track baby
I was born this way"

Wow – there was Lady Gaga at the Oscars singing the classic theology of William Ellery Channing. And I'm not the only one who noticed the UU message in this song. It was a buzz in UU youth groups right from the start. That year it became kind of a UU youth anthem. I understand it was performed over and over at the talent show at youth conferences. I have even seen a video of the minister and youth group at our congregation in Wenatchee Washington singing and dancing to "Born This Way" during a Sunday service.

Lady Gaga and Rev. Channing are both speaking of our first Unitarian Universalist Principle. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We believe everyone is by valuable by their very nature and is born with dignity and goodness. This positive theology of human nature is also reflected in many of our other UU principles, like the use of the democratic process, where individuals all have a say in how leadership will be done. It is also reflected in our charge to engage in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We are good and if we endeavor with our minds and our hearts to seek the truth, it can make us even better people.

Lady Gaga, in this popular song, challenges us to expand our definition of who we see as worthy. Who we see as "not a mistake". She sings,

DON'T BE A DRAG, JUST BE A QUEEN
WHETHER YOU'RE BROKE OR EVERGREEN
YOU'RE BLACK, WHITE, BEIGE, CHOLA DESCENT
YOU'RE LEBANESE, YOU'RE ORIENT
WHETHER LIFE'S DISABILITIES
LEFT YOU OUTCAST, BULLIED, OR TEASED
REJOICE AND LOVE YOURSELF TODAY
'CAUSE BABY YOU WERE BORN THIS WAY

NO MATTER GAY, STRAIGHT, OR BI,
LESBIAN, TRANSGENDERED LIFE
I'M ON THE RIGHT TRACK BABY
I WAS BORN TO SURVIVE

Lady Gaga is holding up a really inclusive view of who is born OK just as they are. She calls encouragement to ethnic and sexual minorities, to all kinds of folks who have been disenfranchised in our society. She tells them they or not broken or inferior in any way, they are, we are all, as she puts it, superstars.

William Ellery Channing also sent us some challenges in his words. He was not quite as all embracing as Lady Gaga – not even close. He was kind of a Victorian uptight kind of Bostonian. In fact one document I read said that he was tormented by guilt about his impure thoughts and problematic urges. Poor guy. But Channing did challenge to us to use our natural Godlike characteristics to improve ourselves and the rest of humanity. Channing was a big believer in free will. He said that when we weave the fabric of our lives, our pure and clean human nature is like the warp of the fabric. It is laid down in the beginning as a foundation. But our actions, our actions that we choose with our free will – those are the weft. Those are the strands that weave in and out to create the fabric of our lives. Channing was not above calling on his congregants to be better people. He made use of guilt as a powerful tool. He felt more than free to tell the people in his church what he thought was right from wrong and he encouraged folks to do the right thing. A number of social reformers, like Joseph Tuckerman who has been called the Father of American Social Work, and Dorothea Dix who reformed the treatment of the mentally ill and

educational reformer Horace Mann, they were all members of his congregation and headed his cry to use their free will to act boldly for the good and make the world a better place. They wanted to live up the call of their faith. Channing inspired his congregants and he also pushed them, he pushed them hard, to be their best selves. Ralph Waldo Emerson, another well known Unitarian, referred to Channing as the “public conscience” of their community.

So what does this all have to do with us here and now? William Ellery Channing was way out there in Boston and way back in history. Lady Gaga, well she is just way out there. You may ask, how can I use this sermon in my life? How is this relevant to me. Here. Today. Well, I think there are some important take away lessons here.

First, remember that our UU theology says that you were born good and pure and wonderful. There are a lot of folks out there that are happy to tell you otherwise. They will tell you that you need to be saved because you were born already condemned. To that kind of thing...just no. Your soul or essence or spirit or whatever you call it did not come into the world tainted by anything bad. Rather it is pure and lovely and wonderful. The spirit of life within you is sacred. This is a very empowering and life affirming message. There are times when we all feel kind of down. Life has a way of throwing us a curve sometimes and we might be tempted to feel like we are worthless, or at least second rate. Our popular culture has a way encouraging this kind of thinking. Ads on the TV and in magazines barrage us with the message that we are too fat or too old and need their product to get thinner and look younger. Cultural expectation can tell us we need to be richer, sexier, have more stuff, be more powerful. I have to say that some of the most competent people I know are secretly troubled by the belief that, deep down, they need to be extra good and extra successful in order to just be good enough; to meet some real or imagined expectation. They are trying to somehow overcome their own sense of shame and inadequacy. This may help create some very successful people but at the cost of a lot of emotional and spiritual pain. What I want to tell you is that our Unitarian Universalist faith and heritage has this life saving message. You were born OK and your soul is a good soul. Your worth is inherent. It is a part of you and not just related to what you have, or do, or earn.

When we know that we are OK at the core, it is easier to generalize and know that other folks are as well. The world is a more peaceful place

when we can see the inherent good in others. The Quakers base their culture of peace on the belief that a bit of the divine spirit, the inner light, lives within us all. When we see the holy in each other, the goodness everyone was born with, it is harder to hate. It is harder to categorize them as a group of “other” and make sweeping generalizations about “those people”. It is easier to work for peace and justice for all people.

Second, you have free will. It is a wonderful thing. Use it well. Even though you were born right the first time that does not mean that everything you do is OK. Unitarian Universalists have occasionally been confused about that one. Some think our lack of judgmental orthodoxy means we have no restrictions of right and wrong. On the contrary, we do believe in moral choices. You are still accountable for your actions. Our liberal faith really holds you accountable because you can’t blame your mistakes on the rotten nature of humanity. We all have choices every day. We can choose to take the high road in human interactions or we can let ourselves fall into traps like looking for revenge when we are angry or making sure we get what we want at the cost of others. We choose our investments and our business dealings based on a number of criteria, some of which emphasis profit and some which emphasis principles. We are personally responsible if the way we make our money hurts other people or destroys the earth. We can choose to look at our fellow human beings, who were also born good and holy but might have made poor choices – we can look at them with contempt or with compassion. We can scorn those we don’t understand or try to learn something about their perspective. Heck, at many grocery stores you can choose paper or plastic. Or you can bring your own re-usable bag. We all make choices all day. I urge you, make good ones.

Third, you are good. As Lady Gaga says, we are all superstars. Because you are good you just may be capable of doing some pretty amazing things to make the world a better place. Not because you have to in order to prove your worth, but because you have worth. You can reach out to those in need and offer your help and support. This could be as easy as listening to another person who is facing a hard time. Listening with respect and love. It could be as hard as spearheading a major project to meet and unmet need or bend with world toward justice. Most really good projects, from the Red Cross to Modern Micro lending efforts in third world countries. They began with the dream and vision of a couple of someones who felt called to make a difference and felt empowered to act on that call.

As Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that can.”

Last but not least – being a person of faith does not need to be an experience of shame. Having a spiritual or religious life does not mean you need to see yourself as broken or sinful. You can, if you like, feel connected with a higher power and still know that you are good and pure and wonderful. Just because some religious doctrines ask you to carry around a basket of shame, not all of them do. Lots don’t. We don’t. We urge you to love who you are and love others as well. Our historic Unitarian belief is that we are created good. And if you are someone who believes in a higher power and you believe in the power of love, then maybe we are all created in the spirit of love. Wow, what a wonderful legacy. And when we let our selves feel it, deep down, then we can go out and love the world. Like our today’s hymn reminds us, you can change the world with your love!

May it be so