

Psalms of Life
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Unitarianism has made important contributions to American history. But if I had to say how our faith had the biggest impact on American life and culture, I would say that it has been through our poetry.

It was Shelley who called poets “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” And it was in this unobtrusive manner that Unitarians of an earlier generation spread their creed, not by loudly preaching the word become flesh, but by quietly helping the flesh to become word. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell were so popular that, together with the Quaker Whittier, they became known as the “household poets.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Cullen Bryant, Alice and Phoebe Cary, Frances Harper and Edward Everett Hale, were other Unitarians whose verses were beloved not only by their countrymen and women, but all the world around. In his book *The Flowering of New England*, the historian Van Wyck Brooks notes that “in Russia, in India, even in China, all these names were favorably known,” sharing the story of one man who, coming to Shakespeare late in life and finding the bard far beyond his expectations, was moved to exclaim that “There are not twenty men in Boston who could have written those plays.” Yet few of these writers considered themselves to be the equals of Shakespeare. They took their verse seriously, but most regarded themselves more modestly, and had more humble aspirations for their poetry, not to change the world, but perhaps to evoke a smile or a sigh, as Longfellow suggests in his poem “The Day Is Done.”

The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wings of Night,
As a feather is wafted downward
From an eagle in his flight.

I see the lights of the village
Gleam through the rain and mist;

And a feeling of sadness come o'er me,
That my soul cannot resist:

A feeling of sadness and longing,
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mist resembles rain.

Come, read to me some poem,
Some simple and heartfelt lay,
That shall soothe this restless feeling,
And banish the thoughts of day.

Not from the grand old masters,
Not from the bards sublime,
Whose distant footsteps echo
Through the corridors of Time.

For, like strains of martial music
Their mighty thoughts suggest
Life's endless toil and endeavour;
And to-night I long for rest.

Read from some humbler poet,
Whose songs gush'd from his heart,
As showers from the clouds of summer,
Or tears from eyelids start;

Who, through long days of labor,
And nights devoid of ease,
Still heard in his soul the music
Of wonderful melodies.

Many modern critics would say that poems like these are overly sentimental. But we need to remember that these poems are statements of faith as well as works of art. And the faith they affirm is unabashedly sentimental in this sense: Unitarians of the nineteenth century were rejecting a religious system based on doctrinal argument and scripture proofs. They were embracing instead a religion of the heart, one rooted in fellow feeling and sympathy rather than in the analysis of ancient texts. Alice Cary,

who was born near Cincinnati, Ohio in 1820, was not part of the “Concord Renaissance,” but her Unitarian convictions shone through in this poem, titled “My Creed.”

I hold that Christian grace abounds
Where charity is seen; that when
We climb to heaven, 'tis on the rounds
Of love to men.

I hold all else named piety
A selfish scheme, a vain pretense;
Where center is not--can there be
Circumference?

This I moreover hold, and dare
Affirm where'er my rhyme may go,--
Whatever things be sweet and fair,
Love makes them so.

Whether it be the lullabies
That charm to rest the nursling bird,
Or the sweet confidence of sighs
And blushes, made without a word.

Whether the dazzling and the flush
Of softly sumptuous garden bowers,
Or by some cabin door, a bush
Of ragged flowers.

'Tis not the wide phylactery,
Nor stubborn fast, nor stated prayers,
That make us saints: we judge the tree
By what it bears.

And when a man can live apart
From works, on theologic trust,
I know the blood about his heart
Is dry as dust.

Unitarians had rejected the Calvinism of their forebears as a bloodless and desiccated religion, one that might be defended intellectually but that would never make sense emotionally or morally. Oliver Wendell Holmes ridiculed the old ways in his famous poem "The Deacon's Masterpiece, or The Wonderful One Horse Shay," likening Puritanism to a buggy built from such impregnable propositions that it seemed the contraption might never wear out, until one day it finally does collapse in a heap, along with its dogmas of depravity and sin. Instead of dwelling on sin and incapacity, Unitarians proclaimed the amplitude of the human spirit, and the poetic image that Holmes chose to express this optimistic faith was not a horse and buggy or any other artificial contrivance, but an image drawn from nature, the chambered nautilus, with its ever widening spirals of growth:

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome a more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea.

Faith in human nature took many forms. Almost all stressed the importance of education, to lift the mind from ignorance to a state of dignity and freedom. While reformers like Elisabeth Peabody and Horace Mann labored to establish universal public schools, poets like Longfellow modeled the ideal of the scholar/citizen, beginning each day translating a few lines of Dante from the Italian as a method of running a ploughshare through the soil of the mind, turning up a hundred thoughts that otherwise might have gone uncultivated.

They believed in education because they believed fiercely in democracy. It was partly Unitarians who had hatched the American revolution. But it fell to a later generation of Unitarians to sing their exploits, lift them to the level of myth and legend, and stamp them indelibly into the dawning national consciousness. Dedicating a monument on the battlegrounds of Concord, Emerson wrote:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

Ralph Waldo's grandfather William, also a minister, had died of camp fever at Ticonderoga, serving as chaplain to the revolutionary army. Longfellow's family had also supported American Independence, his great-grandfather's home burned by British in October of 1775, and like Emerson, Longfellow helped to immortalize those who had risked their lives for freedom:

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town tonight,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,--

You know the rest. In the books you have read,
How the British Regulars fired and fled,--
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
From behind each fence and farmyard wall,
Chasing the redcoats down the lane,
Then crossing the fields to emerge again
Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And only pausing to fire and load.
So through the night rode Paul Revere . . .

Democracy was shortly to face its most important test in the gathering conflict between north and south. Another Unitarian, John Quincy Adams, had challenged the slave power in Congress, and risen to the defense of human cargo of the slaving ship

Amistad before the U.S. Supreme Court. Longfellow wrote powerfully of a similar incident in his poem "The Witnesses":

In Ocean's wide domains,
Half buried in the sands,
Lie skeletons in chains,
With shackled feet and hands.

Beyond the fall of dews,
Deeper than plummet lies,
Float ships, with all their crews,
No more to sink or rise.

There the black Slave-ship swims,
Freighted with human forms,
Whose fettered, fleshless limbs
Are not the proof of storms.

These are the bones of Slaves;
They gleam from the abyss;
They cry, from yawning waves,
"We are the Witnesses!"

As one of his final acts in Congress, John Quincy Adams had introduced a resolution opposing the United States' war against Mexico, which was widely seen as an attempt to expand the slave-holding territories of the nation. The Unitarian poet James Russell Lowell also opposed the Mexican War in his long poem "The Present Crisis," which became the basis for the rousing hymn "Once To Every Soul and Nation."

Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide,
in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side . . .

When Americans did finally take up arms brother against brother, those who weren't whistling Dixie were more than likely singing the well-known anthem of another Unitarian poetess, Julia Ward Howe, whose "Battle Hymn of the Republic" became a refrain known to young and old.

But music and poetry could reconcile as well as divide. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was an African American poet, born a free black in Baltimore in 1825 who later became a member of Philadelphia's First Unitarian Church. Her stanzas were among the best sellers of the nineteenth century, like this poem, "Home Sweet Home," that spoke of a human brotherhood stronger than any strife.

When the cannon's lips were dumb,
Thoughts of home and all its loved ones
To the soldier's heart would come.

On the margin of a river,
'Mid the evening's dews and damps,
Could be heard the sounds of music
Rising from two hostile camps ...

From the fields of strife and carnage,
Gentle thoughts began to roam,
And a tender strain of music
Rose with words of "Home, Sweet Home."

Then the hearts of strong men melted,
For amid our grief and sin
Still remains that "touch of nature,"
Telling us we all are kin.

In one grand but gentle chorus,
Floating to the starry dome,
Came the words that brought them nearer,
Words that told of "Home, Sweet Home."

For awhile, all strife forgotten,
They were only brothers then,
Joining in the sweet old chorus,
Not as soldiers, but as men.

The war brought suffering and death on an untold scale, forcing men and women to search for a hope strong enough to face grief and loss. James Russel Lowell shared a typically Unitarian response in his poem "The First Snowfall," a lament not for the

heroes of the battlefield, but for a child. Such parental grief was all too common in the nineteenth century. Emerson and Longfellow both lost beloved children (Emerson lost his six-year-old son Waldo to illness, while Longfellow lost his first child and his first wife when she suffered a miscarriage) and here Lowell also mourns a daughter buried in the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, even as he finds comfort in the quiet beauty of falling snow in winter, which like time and the turning seasons of nature, both heals and renews.

The snow had begun in the gloaming,
And busily all the night
Had been heaping field and highway
With a silence deep and white.

Every pine and fir and hemlock
Wore ermine too dear for an earl,
And the poorest twig on the elm-tree
Was ridged inch deep with pearl.

I thought of a mound in sweet Auburn
Where a little headstone stood;
How the flakes were folding it gently,
As did robins the babes in the wood.

Up spoke our own little Mabel,
Saying, "Father, who makes it snow?"
And I told of the good All-father
Who cares for us here below.

Again I looked at the snow-fall,
And thought of the leaden sky
That arched o'er our first great sorrow,
When that mound was heaped so high.

I remembered the gradual patience
That fell from that cloud-like snow,
Flake by flake, healing and hiding
The scar of our deep-plunged woe.

And again to the child I whispered,
“The snow that husheth all,
Darling, the merciful Father
Alone can make it fall!”

Then, with eyes that saw not, I kissed her;
And she, kissing back, could not know
That my kiss was given to her sister
Folded close under deepening snow.

How is it that we judge the truth of any religion? I think we judge it as we would judge the truth of a poem, by its power to break our hearts, by the inspiration it offers to more noble living, by its ability to make our spines tingle with hints of mystery and awe. Religion does not ultimately consist of propositions, to be proved or disproven. Instead, it's a bundle of intimations and longings, cries for help and impossible dreams.

Unitarianism was a great faith at one time, because it produced such great poetry, verses that became the common property of a nation, expressing the pride, the sorrow, the values and commitments of millions of Americans. It never spoke in sectarian terms, but addressed the human universals of grief and gladness, war and peace. And if our movement is to make an outstanding contribution once again, it will be because we learn to speak once more the language of verse, in terms that everyone can accept and understand.

As the Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes wrote many years ago, “Nothing that any theologian ever wrote about God has helped me much, but everything that the poets have written about flowers, and birds, and skies, and seas, and the saviors of the race, and God--whoever he or she may be--has at one time or another reached my soul! More and more, as I grow older, I live in the lovely thought of these prophets and seers. The theologians gather dust upon the shelves of my library, but the poets are stained with my fingers and blotted with my tears.”

Can poetry speak to us again? Can it rejuvenate our weary spirits? Can it lift our vision to a higher plane? Can it fire us with passion? Startle us into gratitude? Can it lead us toward the holy? Can poetry--and can religion--do all this? Judging from our history, I would say, it's the only thing that ever has.