

Attaining God-likeness

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“Education develops full aliveness ... it is a spiritual practice where people develop their God-likeness.” This is not how we often think of education. In our world education is commodity or a means to greater purchasing power. We seek to measure it with standardized tests for our children. Parents push their children to “major in something useful” so that they can have jobs when they finish college. What does it mean that education develops full aliveness and that people develop their God-likeness?

Education that develops the fullness of humanity involves the whole person. It is not solely about learning a new skill, reading another book, it is also about being moved by music, a story, a poem. It involves connections with others – friends, partners, spouses, lovers, children, community. It consists of moments of deep connection that can happen at any time and at any age. One of those moments for me came when I was probably around 10 years old. My whole family had gathered for Christmas at my house – my grandparents, my great-grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins and I remember just stopping and realizing that the love in the house was tangible – I could taste it and touch it. This kind of education is not just about our minds – but our souls – the essence of who we are.

For Channing education’s purpose was to develop the powers of the soul, that each may know the Divine because each was developing in likeness to the

Divine. What is this image of the Divine that Channing held? Channing's image of God was truly radical, and heretical for his day. Channing held up an image of the Divine as a loving parent – watching, caring, loving all people, wanting them to be full and whole. A Divinity who longed, like a parent longs, to be in deep, loving relationship and wanting all good things for its child. This vision was truly what broke Channing and the other early Unitarians from the “orthodox” clergy and churches. For the Calvinist churches, humanity was helplessly fallen, helplessly steeped in sin and depravity. Most were condemned to eternal torment and the fact that a very few were saved at all was a testament not to humanity's traits but rather God's mercy. The image here was of a just and angry God who had every right to throw every single person into eternal torment. God was aloof and all knowing – utterly separate from humanity.

Channing's heresy was to declare that humanity possessed the image and likeness of God and that people could know God. In fact, for Channing, the purpose of education was for people to grow into their Divine nature and know God more deeply. It was for this reason also that Channing spoke out against slavery and the growing dehumanization of the industrial revolution. Channing knew that people could not develop into their full selves if they were slaves or trapped in economic systems that stripped people of their humanity.

Channing argues that developing our soul's powers does not require extraordinary acts or skill, rather it is through our everyday connections through the use of our highest selves. What is our highest self? Our search for understanding

through study, our relationships, conscience, love and making ethical choices are some of the ways we know God and develop these powers of the soul.

Rebecca Parker tells us that education is at the heart of Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice. Drawing on Channing, Parker argues that education, whether in a seminary or in a congregation, is about developing the whole person...drawing people into the fullness of their humanity. In the essay from which today's reading is taken, she states that "to teach is to cooperate with forces of growth, transformation, healing, change, discovery, creativity and revolution that are not of the teacher's making." This model of education is not a banking model ... the students...all of us...are not blank slates or empty vessels to be filled with knowledge that is out there somewhere. It is not something that someone else possesses and then gives to someone else. Rather these soul powers, this humanity, exists within each person. Other people can help draw them out, can give us opportunities to try them out but they cannot impose them from without. We cannot do this work alone and we cannot sit by passively waiting for it to happen.

This education of the whole person requires the use of multiple models and senses. It is not just about classrooms, books and all the things we think of as being part of learning and yet it is also about those things. Channing spent countless hours reading, writing, studying and it was in large part that his radical ideas came as a result of that work. Yet it was also through his relationships, his observations of society and nature, in congregational life that he and his ideas were shaped, formed and tested.

In my own life this holistic, soul forming education occurred in traditional places of learning but never just in the classroom. My love of theology and my first taste of it began while I was a student at Georgetown. Every Georgetown student takes two theology classes. My first theology class came in the spring of my first year there. I took “Introduction to Catholic Theology” with Dr. Monika Hellwigg. I remember reading the course description and telling my mother about the class. I told her we would be learning about eschatology, ecclesiology, Christology. I had no idea what those words meant but I was so excited about this class. I was excited because I was well versed in the “what” of my Roman Catholic faith. I knew what the seven sacraments were, I had memorized the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit for my Confirmation Class, I had taken ethics classes and Bible classes – for I attended all Catholic schools for both elementary and high school. I had attended Mass all my life and was deeply active both in my parish at home and in the campus ministry at Georgetown. I wanted to know “why”. Why do we believe the things that we believe? Where do they come from?

Well this class did not disappoint. I learned eschatology is the study of end times – life after death, life after the worlds end, ecclesiology is the study of the church ... we might call it polity and Christology is the study of the nature of Jesus and I didn't like all the answers. In some cases, I saw how doctrine and dogma resulted from the Roman Catholic Church's dominance of Europe and its role as “empire”. In some cases I just had to laugh like at how “limbo” came into being and then later had to be corrected. It was here that my first deep questioning of my Catholicism occurred. It was here that I began to wonder if I could stay within the

church. This was not all the result of one class. It was also late night discussions with friends usually after the late night 11:15 mass that I attended most weeknights. My feminism emerged asking new questions and posing new problems. My deep involvement in campus ministry and regular participation in a worshipping community gave me a rich context in which to explore these questions of faith. I would go on at Georgetown to minor in theology – so there were many more courses and questions. My point is that yes, books and reading and classroom instruction were informative and helped frame the questions but it was not the full story. It included the connections of my friends, community, worship, community service and religious leaders who gave permission and encouraged my questions. These experiences shaped me and changed me. Change was not always easy. My deeply held assumptions and ways of looking at the world were challenged and I was forced out of my narrow comfort zone. Eventually after Georgetown and many other “educational” experiences later, I would come to Unitarian Universalism.

Unitarian Universalism has a rich and deep history of education. We clearly value it as most people in our movement have not only college degrees but Masters and PhD's. Yet sometimes we can focus too narrowly on rational, head knowledge. We need that knowledge and yet we need more. We are not just our minds, but we are hearts and souls as well. We need connection, community, relationship. Attaining likeness to God is not something one does by oneself. Channing reminds us it does not require leaving society. It does not even require that you go to seminary. It does however require an open mind and heart and a community. This kind of education is not a solitary, self-help kind of quest. It does at times require us

to spend time alone – reflecting, meditating, praying. It also requires study – texts and books can help us along way – to find out what others have learned. It requires conversation and relationship with others. It requires worship and our full participation in it – by our singing, by our silence, by our words, our listening, our presence. It means we must be willing to change. This kind of education challenges the status quo, questions our assumptions and we may not always like where it leads us. It is not always easy. Holistic education that develops the fullness of a person, the fullness of a soul as Rebecca says, requires our whole selves and none of us can do it alone.

This education is not for us alone, it is for the world. The world is hungry; it is filled with dehumanizing forces that do not want people to use their soul powers. People can thwart these soul powers, can stifle opportunity and the crush of oppression can make it seem as if this image or spark of the Divine is gone entirely. The development of a soul, a whole person is a threat to the powers of consumerism, racism, heterosexism, sexism because when people exercise their soul powers, when they connect deeply with others, when they serve others, then they truly know that we are all connected – none is less than another.

So may we put education at the heart of our spiritual practice, at the heart of our community. May we be a place where people of all ages, stages of life, and backgrounds unfold their powers, may we grow each other's souls that we may attain God-likeness. May we then take what we learn here and carry it out into the world ... a world that is hungry, longing for wholeness, and for healing.

May it be so.