

A UNITARIAN PRESIDENCY?

A Service by Fritz Hudson

Presented August 22, 2004

Chalice Lighting

Give ear, O my people, to my speech, incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old:

What I have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from our children

That the generation to come might know them, even the children yet to be born,

Who should declare them in their turn to the ages.

Light Chalice

Our chalice lighting words are ones I've used many times. I've always known they were old; they come from what's known as the book of psalms or songs in the Jewish Bible. That means that they were written first in Hebrew more than 2500 years ago.

I found them this week, though, in this book. It surely looks old. It is old, for us, at least. It's called "Services for Congregational Worship" published by the American Unitarian Association in 1914. It's 90 years old, and it's the great-grandparent of our "Singing the Living Tradition," which is just 10 years old this year. This red book, now 67 years old is it's grandparent, and this blue book, now 39 years old, is it's parent. For in our church, just as we have generations of people, we have generations of songs and services that hold us together.

As you know, all this summer long, our children's Sundays have been spent becoming acquainted with our faith's prophetic women and men from many generations - all the way from Miguel Servet of Spain, who first discovered the gas exchange processes of our circulatory system 500 years ago, but then was burned at the stake for promoting Unitarian beliefs - to Christopher Reeves, who first became famous in our generation for portraying Superman in movies, but now uses his fame to promote scientific stem-cell research.

Their stories are our "parables," our "sayings of old," what we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from our children, that all generations to come might know them.

This morning in their Gathering Place, Kim, our Education Director, will remind our children of all they've learned, all these parables and sayings of old. Meanwhile we adults will be learning a parable or two of our own, about Unitarian Presidents of the United States. It's been awhile since a Unitarian was our nation's President, actually since just about the time that our great-grandparents created this service book. But just as we don't hide or forget what they sang and read, we will not hide or forget their example of faith and leadership. We will declare it, in our turn to the ages.

The tune of our opening song is in this book as well. The words we sing with it now, though are

found as #290 in our songbook, "Bring, O Past, Your Honor"

Song

Introduction: SOULCRAFT & STATESMANSHIP: THE MOLD

"Bring, O Past your honor; Bring O Time your harvest ..."

Did any of you, when you heard Bill play the tune for our song, find words other than the ones on your page bidding from your memory to be sung? Were they:

"Bring O Morn thy music! Night thy starlit silence!

Oceans, laugh the rapture to the storm-winds coursing free," for anyone?

Those words are set to the same tune in song #39 in our book; in this 1914 Services book, they were the newest words set to that tune as hymn #6. "Bring O past you honor" didn't come to life until two generations later, in the blue book.

But, if those weren't the words in your memory, were they perhaps:

"Holy, Holy, Holy." Yes? *"Holy, Holy, Holy, Author of creation?"* No? That is how #26 in our gray book begins, the third hymn in it which is set to this same tune.

Perhaps your memory has a deeper wellspring. Did it say, perhaps,

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord, God Almighty. Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee?"

In fact you'd find those words as hymn #5 in the 1914 book, back before we got nervous about imaging God as a male Lord.

So perhaps your memory is just well-grounded in its Unitarianism. But here's the real test. What are the last words in the verses your memory wants to sing, in the place of where we just sang,

"To Holiness, to Love and Liberty;" or

"Faith, hope and love for all humanity?"

Does your memory really want to sing: *"Who was, and is, and evermore shalt be"*, there? That's how our current #26 & #39 end. If not, however, 1914's hymns 5 & 6, won't rescue you. Their ending is just slightly more archaic: *"Who wert and art, and evermore shalt be."* Your memory can't be singing *"God in three persons, blessed trinity?"* can it? Surely we're all thoroughgoing Unitarians here, right? Well, maybe not quite so thoroughgoing, not at least in our memories.

I confess sometimes I can't understand why we haven't abandoned this tune long ago. After all, it was written for just those ending words. It's name, down at the lower right corner, as you see, is Nicea, the place where the Christian world's bishops decided in 325AD that God as Trinity would be orthodoxy, "straight" teaching, and God as Unity would be heterodoxy, "different" teaching, our first form of heresy. The tune was composed for the Anglican church's orthodox words in 1861, about the time that Unitarians, following Ralph Waldo Emerson's inspiration, began seeing ourselves as larger than a Christian heresy, as drawing on "the wisdom of the world's religions." "We are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision," in our "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" (U.U.A. Principles & Purposes), but our loyalty to even this tune is probably best understood as expressing our faith that "spiritual growth" depends on continuous intercourse with our roots.

Just four years before *Nicea* was first sung, in 1857, a baby boy was born to Louise Torrey and Alphonso Taft of Cincinnati, Ohio. By then active members for ten years in the First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati, Alphonso by now serving it as trustee, they undoubtedly brought the baby to the church for what would have still been called a "Christening Service," rather than a "Naming" or "Child Dedication," as now. (Ishbel Ross. *An American Family: the Tafts 1678-1964* p.22) He was christened William Howard Taft.

By the time the tune *Nicea*, with old and new words, was carried into this 1914 Unitarian service and song book, Will, at 57 was already two years past his service as our nation's 27th President. He was in fact the fourth U.S. President to have been also a member of our churches. The Adams', John and John Quincy's, lifelong long church, the First Parish Church of Quincy, Massachusetts, however, only evolved into a Unitarian Church in the father's later and the son's early adult years. It would have formally voted itself Unitarian within a few short years before John Quincy's election as President in 1824 and his father's death in 1826. While the independent identity of Unitarian churches was well-established by the time Millard Fillmore became President in 1850, when he was 50 years old, the formation of his faith in younger years, in various churches in New York State, could only have been part of an evolution toward Unitarianism. William Howard Taft thus was the first, and so far the only life-long Unitarian President. In comparison to the forthrightly born-again Methodist who currently holds the office, or his almost as proudly born-again Baptist predecessor, or his somewhat more circumspectly Roman Catholic opponent in this fall's election, Taft is our only concrete model for how our faith might inform the leadership of our country.

How might our soulcraft inform statesmanship? How might our faith inform our expectations for an ideally religiously inspired presidency? We could argue that the first mold for this relationship was established by Unitarians, if not by Unitarian Church members. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson did share a belief in the unity of God and the humanity, rather than the divinity, of Jesus, even as they were shaping our presidency as its second and third holders. Their insistence that a President's faith was a private rather than a public matter, that soulcraft was separable from statesmanship, undoubtedly helped allow seven of their 21 successors in the nineteenth century to remain free of membership in any church, following Jefferson's example. The last unchurched President Chester Arthur, however, left the office in 1885. Twenty years later, Theodore Roosevelt, Will Taft's predecessor and sponsor, could insist that church-going was a presidential responsibility. And the mold for a public role for our presidents' faith seems to have become only more strong ever since.

This year James Chace, government professor at Bard College, published the book *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs -- the Election That Changed the Country*. In its prologue he writes, "In its essence, 1912 introduced a conflict between progressive idealism, later incarnated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal -- and subsequently by Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, and Clinton -- and conservative values, which reached their fullness with the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. The broken friendship between Taft and Roosevelt inflicted wounds on the Republican Party that have never been healed. For the rest of the century and even into the next, the Republican Party has been riven by the struggle between reform and reaction, and between unilateralism in foreign relations and cosmopolitan internationalism." (p.8)

"Whoa!" I thought when I read that. Could it be that William Howard Taft, the last Unitarian President, actually sowed the seeds of Reagan/Bush domestic reactionaryism and foreign

unilateralism? Could our faith in its only presidential model have given seed to a political movement whose current expression is at complete odds with most of our church's current public positions? More importantly, what would our faith have us look for and act to find in the presidency today? In a few moments, I'll try to look at these questions more deeply through the lens of our only truly Unitarian President's legacy.

Music, Offering and Announcements, Milestones, Millstones, Stepping Stones

Sermon: A UNITARIAN PRESIDENCY?

"I am a Unitarian. I believe in God. I do not believe in the divinity of Christ, and there are many other of the postulates of the Orthodox creed to which I cannot subscribe. I am not, however, a scoffer at religion, but on the contrary I recognize in the fullest manner the elevating influence that it has and always will have in the history of mankind." (Ishbel Ross *An American Family: The Tafts* p.123)

William Howard Taft wrote these words to his brother Harry in 1899. It was his explanation for discouraging Harry from further promoting him as a candidate for the then vacant presidency of Yale University. Will was, to be sure, a strong candidate in many ways. Alphonso Taft, Will's and Harry's father, had been an student organizer of the now much-mentioned Skull & Bones secret society - much mentioned because the only thing we may know for sure already about this year's presidential election is that the winner will also be a member of the Skull & Bones at Yale. Both George Bush & John Kerry are. Of Alphonso's four well-accomplished sons, all Yale graduates and Skull & Bones members, Will, at 42, had been the one with a meteoric career. Starting as assistant prosecutor of Cincinnati's Hamilton County, he'd been appointed first Ohio Supreme Court Justice, then U.S. Solicitor General under President Benjamin Harrison, and then United States Circuit Judge. He loved Yale college; he eventually happily joined it's law school faculty after his term as U.S. President. He knew, though, that Yale's presidency was simply out of reach for a Unitarian. Just a century before, while Harvard was birthing American Unitarianism, Yale had stood up as it orthodoxy's most ardent defender. There was no bridge across that chasm.

Alphonso Taft, born and raised in Vermont, had been a nominally orthodox Congregationalist in his student days at Yale. When he chose Cincinnati to initiate his law career, he first attended the Presbyterian Church there. In the late 1840s, however, he decided to commit his soulcraft to the then fledgling First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati. The move had its costs. One biographer writes, "it was the least popular of all denominations in Ohio." (Ross p.22). But Alphonso's public expression of his faith in his time and place would feel quite comfortable in our here and now. As a young lawyer he helped create a House of Refuge for delinquent children, arguing that they were not criminals needing punishment, but victims of parental neglect needing treatment. (Ross.13). Later, as a judge, he supported ruling that a local school board could not be enjoined from abandoning religious instruction. He wrote that the board had an obligation, as well as a right, to keep religious partisanship out of the schools. (Ross.54) In the period just prior to the Civil War, Alphonso was instrumental in bringing to the Cincinnati Unitarian pulpit the firebrand abolitionist minister, Moncure Conway. He then staunchly and publicly defended Conway's freedom of the pulpit. 100 years later, in the 1950s, that spirit in the Cincinnati church was still bright enough to attract a young African American single mother and her son to begin attending. The son is now U.U. Association President Bill Sinkford. In the 1870s, President Ulysses S. Grant got Alphonso Taft to leave

Cincinnati for a time to serve in Washington, first as Secretary of War and then as U.S. Attorney General. Following the election of 1876, in which neither Samuel Tilden nor Rutherford Hayes could claim the votes necessary to succeed Grant, it was Attorney General Taft who framed the bill creating the electoral commission which ultimately declared Hayes, the Republican, the winner. (Ross.62) Grant and Taft, of course, were also Republicans. Did Alphonso's commission exercise more objective judiciousness in resolving that electoral dispute than our Republican-majority-appointed Supreme Court did in resolving the 2000 election? I'd need to do more research to say, but Alphonso's life-long record of serving justice rather than personal advantage does cause me to wonder.

Alphonso's second wife, Louisa Torrey Taft, was Will's mother. Her Unitarianism was rooted in her own mother's decision years earlier in Massachusetts to "follow Dr. William Ellery Channing into the Unitarian fold." (Ross.16-17). You'll recognize her spirit as well. During the Civil War, Cincinnati churches held a huge fair to raise money for war relief. To staff its booth, Louisa told her co-workers, "Our church invited all of the heathen who didn't belong anywhere." (Ross.39) In the same spirit, the social circle Alphonso and Louisa invited into their home included "all manner of people." (Ross.31)

This was the spirit with which William Howard Taft was "christened" and the models given him to live up to. From his birth, however, he took on his own character. If we know only one thing about William Howard Taft, what is it? That he was enormous, fat, obese. Seven weeks after his birth, Louisa wrote to her sister, "He is very large for his age and grows fat every day. ... He has such a large waist, that he cannot wear any of the dresses that are made with belts." Beyond his size, in his own time, the one thing that all people knew of Will's spirit was his friendliness. In that same letter, Louisa writes, "He spreads his hands to anyone who will take him and his face is wreathed in smiles at the slightest provocation." (Henry F. Priddle. *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft*. 1939. p.3) Both traits would become only more strong over all his life.

Less than a year after Will had squelched his family's draft to become Yale's President, he felt unable to reject President McKinley's plea that he become Governor-General of the Philippines, newly wrested from Spain in war. Will asked the President if he might be better served by someone who supported the acquisition of the islands, McKinley answered "I think I can trust the man who didn't want them better than I can the man who did." (Ross.125) This made Will his time's Robert Bremer, I suppose. Unlike Governor Bremer in Iraq, however, Governor Taft felt able to travel the country and get to know the people on horseback. Back in Manila from an early fact-finding trip, Will cabled Secretary of War Elihu Root: "Stood trip well. Rode horseback twenty five miles." Secretary Root cabled back: "How is the horse." When Will was elected President in 1908, an early executive order was to install a custom-made bathtub, nearly four feet wide, because the President had gotten stuck in its predecessor. (Chace.24) For most of his life, he weighed well over 300 lbs.

When Will became President, he asked Theodore Roosevelt's military aide to continue in his service. Soon thereafter Major Archie Butts could write to his family "I have found out three things he does well. He dances well, he curses well, and he laughs well." (Ross.216) Will Taft was always good company. And in fact, whatever his competence, it was his friendliness that both made and broke Taft's presidency. He became president because he was Theodore Roosevelt's best friend, and he lost his presidency largely because he couldn't practice his predecessor's ruthless use of presidential power.

When Roosevelt took over the Presidency at McKinley's assassination, he inherited Roosevelt as

Governor-General of the Philippines. The two men had been friends since their first service in Washington under President Benjamin Harrison - Taft as solicitor general, Roosevelt as Civil Service Commissioner. Once the Philippine colonial government was stabilized, Roosevelt called Taft to follow his father's path to Washington, as Secretary of War. In that position, he directed U.S. management of all the spoils of the Spanish-American War: Cuba and Panama, in addition to the Philippines. Based on this close collaboration, Roosevelt first was inclined to fulfill Will's most fervent dream, to be named Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Gradually, though Roosevelt began to believe that Taft's immense people skills might make him the best person to get the conservative congress to actually fulfill his grandiose promises for economic reform and equalization of opportunity for the little guy. And he had an ally, Taft's wife Nellie. One night in 1906, after dinner at the White House, President Roosevelt herded Will and Nellie into his library, sat before them in his easy chair, threw back his head and closed his eyes to intone, "I am the seventh son of a seventh daughter and I have clairvoyant powers. I see a man weighing three hundred and fifty pounds. There is something hanging over his head. I cannot make out what it is. ... At one time it looks like the presidency, then again it looks like the chief justiceship." Will said, "Make it the chief justiceship," Nellie said, "Make it the presidency." s with many Unitarian men, past and present, Will had a dangerous attraction to strong women.

Roosevelt's still cresting power at the close of his presidency was such that he could almost hand Taft both the Republican nomination and the electoral victory over Democrat, and Lincolnite, William Jennings Bryan. The strength and accomplishments of Will's presidency, and their consonance with Unitarian values, are there to be found by those who look. He created the Children's Bureau for public health (Ross.257). He shepherded the first income tax on corporations through the congress. (Ross.265) He found more places in government for African Americans (Ross.187). He included many from both parties in his government and used his social graces to bring people from all sects and strata together. He even succeeded in effecting more trust-break-ups than Roosevelt had. (Chace.95) Where President William Howard Taft failed was in accomplishing the Herculean task that President Roosevelt had set him up for. In 1908 Republican platform promised a reduction in trade tariffs that would help the small business-man and consumer while hurting the captains of industry. Taft, however, with all his friendliness, could not get the conservative Republican leaders of congress to deliver on their promise. Unlike his predecessor and mentor, Taft was simply unwilling to use his power over patronage in their districts to force the legislators to lower the tariffs. To him, TR's contention that "executive power was limited only by specific restrictions and prohibitions appearing in the constitution," was "unsafe doctrine," he said. It assumes the president "is to play the part of a universal providence and set all things right." (Chace.33-34). Where President really fell afoul of the people was in publicly defending the tariff bill as "the best the Republican Party had ever passed." That was true, but no cause for celebration. When Roosevelt returned from his year on African safari, he was greeted with Taft's letter, "I have conscientiously been trying to carry out your policies, but my method for doing so has not worked smoothly." This opened the door for Roosevelt ultimately to attempt to wrest the nomination from Taft at the 1912 Republican Convention, and once that failed, to to run his independent Bull Moose campaign. In that 1912 election, he did manage to garner slightly more votes than Taft. Taft and Roosevelt, combined, far out-pollled Wilson. But Wilson, plurality, was the clear winner. In writing to Nellie, as he left office, Taft himself could only say, "It is a very humdrum, uninteresting administration, and it does not attract the attention of enthusiasm of anybody, but after I am out I think that you and I can look back to some pleasure in having done something for the benefit of the public weal." (Ross.259)

As a Unitarian model, there are aspects of William Howard Taft's public expression of our faith which bring discomfort. First off, let me say he never wavered from his loyalty to our church. He joined All Souls Church in Washington D.C. church immediately upon moving there. He was a faithful attender there throughout his presidency, even as his wife took the children to her Episcopal Church. After leaving office, while he was on the faculty at Yale, he served as Moderator at the American Unitarian Association General Conference in Montreal in 1918. I'm sure, however, that some of us would find discomfort in the position he advocated there respecting our nation's approach to World War I. "It is the duty of our church," he told to delegates, "to preach the righteousness of the war and the necessity for our winning it in the interest of the peace of the world. Let there be no doubt that our country's cause ... is our cause." He introduced a motion: "That it is the sense of this Unitarian Conference that this war must be carried to a successful issue, ... that we ... approve the measures of President Wilson and Congress to carry on this war." Speaking in opposition to the motion were such passivist ministers as John Haynes Holmes of New York, and, very likely, Arthur Weatherly of our own church. Taft's motion, however, carried 236 to 9. In contrast to war supporters in high places in our time, Will's support extended to allowing his son Charles to serve on the front lines of his time, however.

Other dimensions of Taft's public work would many current Unitarian's pause. Though he was a lover and admirer of strong women he could not bring himself to advocate for women's suffrage. He could only encourage his wife and daughter, herself a Yale Ph.D. to vote once it suffrage was granted. As Philippine Governor, Taft could negotiate with the Pope in Rome to turn church lands over to small farmers, (Ross.146) but he was slow to see the Philippine people, whom he loved dearly, as ready to take on self-governing democracy. He made the same judgment of Cubans. He had similar reservations for American direct democracy, opposing the movements of his time to allow direct popular initiative, referenda, recall, and direct primaries. (Ross.266) There was a certain paternalism to Taft's friendliness.

One dimension of Taft's public life that our values would likely arouse our applause may in fact have been his greatest shortcoming as President. He tended to make up his mind slowly and he liked to consult many before making decisions. (Ross.217) Acknowledging that he was neither a campaigner or a spellbinder, he relied on the power of facts to persuade people. (Ross.159) As President his methodical, reasoned approach may well have been what prevented him from inciting the passion necessary for his values to carry the day. We might in fact wish that Will could have been slightly less friendly. We might even wish him to have been less susceptible to the strong woman he loved. When, in 1921, Will finally was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court by President Warren Harding, he became far more successful and far more happy than he ever was as President. He served as Chief Justice until the end of his life in 1930.

In light of all this, I think that Professor Chace's implication that Taft himself may have been the seed of Reagan/Bush domestic reactionaryism and foreign unilateralism is most unfair. In foreign affairs, Theodore Roosevelt was the unilateralist, never Taft. On the domestic side, the worst that can be said of William Howard Taft himself is that his reason and friendliness were no match for the reactionary response that Republicans had to Roosevelt's efforts to promote egalitarianism. As Senator Jonathan P. Dolliver opined in his time, Will was simply "a large amiable island surrounded entirely by persons who knew exactly what they wanted." (Ross.267)

Frankly, I am concerned about our personal investment in our relationships with Presidents. I'm not

at all sure that our investment in their faith is in the long-term interest of our country. Faith is far too shrouded in mystery and personal experience to ever be well-understood or judged from afar. Teddy Roosevelt, in advising Taft in his first run for the presidency, specifically urged him to "give no specifics about your faith." I think that is probably still good advice for an American President.

As a prophetic man for us, however, a man of parable to be passed to our children, I think Willima Howard Taft's shadow, was best discerned by another Will, Will Rogers, the humorist. "It is great to be great, but it's greater to be human," Rogers said. "He was our great human fellow because there was more of him to be human. We are parting with three hundred pounds of solid charity to everybody, and love and affection for all his fellow men." (Ross.267)

The words of hymn number 6, newly set to the tune Nicea in this 1914 book – words Will Taft himself would have sung many times - could just as well be addressed to his spirit as to any "Lord."

*Light us! Lead us! Love us! cry the groping nations,
Pleading in the thousand tongues, but naming only thee ...
Homeward draws the spirit to thy Spirit yearning, --
Who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be!*

Please join in our closing song, "Sing Out Praises for the Journey", Number 295

Song

Again from our "Services for Congregational Worship" of 1914", words preserved from the Hebrew of "Ecclesiasticus"

*Let us call to remembrance the great and good, ...
Those who were leaders of the people by their judgment, ...
Wise and eloquent in their teachings, and through knowledge and might, fit helpers of the people.
...
There be some who have left a name behind them, and whose memory is sweet.
And there be some who have no memorial, who are perished as though they had never been.
But their righteousness has not been forgotten, and the glory of their work cannot be blotted out.
...
The people will tell of their wisdom, and the congregation will show forth their praise.*

Extinguish Chalice