

A Movable Feast¹

25 Beacon Street -- A Love Story

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At the occasion of the ordination of Jennifer
Channin
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Every profession has its own lingo. You cannot become a doctor without learning how to examine a femur.² You cannot become a truck driver without learning how to avoid a hulcher gulcher³. You cannot become a server at a coffee shop in Canada without learning how to prepare a “double double”.⁴ You cannot become a Unitarian Universalist Minister

¹ In the Christian tradition a Movable Feast is a holiday that is not fixed to a particular date on the calendar. It was used by Ernest Hemingway as the title for his memoirs. At the beginning of his career Hemingway lived in a neighborhood in Paris that was occupied by several of the most celebrated writers of the last century. He wrote: *If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.*

² Thigh bone

³ traffic jam

⁴ double cream, double sugar

without learning about our most famous address: 25 Beacon Street in Boston, Massachusetts.

Unitarian Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed that Boston was the hub of the solar system. It was built to be “a city on a hill”, “a beacon to the world”-- the golden dome of the Massachusetts State House shining at its very center, and there on its right hand, nestled in the metaphorical bosom of Abraham: the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association, 25 Beacon Street.

More than an office building, it has been our axis mundi, the imaginary center of our world, the portal between every day and mystical, the destination of religious pilgrimages and the repository for holy relics: including the writing desk of Thomas Starr King and a lock of hair of William Ellery Channing's. Who knows?!? Perhaps now that it is going to be thoroughly cleaned out, maybe we'll find the brain of Theodore Parker.

Parker was one of our most brilliant ministers: he died young in 1860. His brain was preserved for posterity to examine—just as Einstein’s brain was and still is kept here in this neighborhood. Then sometime in the 1880’s Parker’s brain went missing. The current 25 Beacon St. did not become Unitarian headquarters until 1927, but you never know.

I say current 25 Beacon St., because yes, it’s true, there was another 25 Beacon Street before this one. When the American Unitarian Association moved into the first 25 Beacon Street headquarters in 1886 it was on the other side of the State House. When they moved the headquarters in 1927 they had enough pull with the Massachusetts legislature that a bill was passed to allow them to take their address with them: confusing people looking for nearby buildings for generations to follow. Its being out of normal numerical sequence adding to its allure as a portal into the extraordinary, like Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ in Harry Potter’s Wizarding World.

This spring the administration announced that it will be selling 25 Beacon Street and moving our headquarters to two floors in a former warehouse building in Boston's Innovation District. The space will be completely rebuilt, allowing us to design offices that are open, welcoming, technology friendly, and as close to carbon neutral as possible.

In this sermon I want to declare my love for the old building, and tell you why I support this move.

Within easy walking distance of 25 Beacon Street the history and the ongoing life of our movement is everywhere: a few blocks east is King's Chapel, which openly embraced Unitarian theology in 1785 and which remains one of our few congregation's where the name and the teachings of Jesus are expounded on a regular basis: a few blocks in the other direction is the site of the old Charles Street Meeting House where Universalist Kenneth Patton and others introduced the idea of Universalism as a melting pot for the great religious traditions of

the world: a few block further up river is the First Church of Boston—there’s a lot of history connected with that place: and a few blocks back in the direction of 25 Beacon., the Arlington Street Church.

During my Divinity School years I served as Director of Religious Education of the Arlington Street Church. I was privileged to be working with the Reverend Victor Carpenter, a prophetic voice for social justice and practicing the politics of radical inclusivity. The Arlington Street Church has a special place in the hearts of many in our movement. It was graced by the ministry of William Ellery Channing. It was in his study that a group of people first thought up the idea of having a headquarters for our faith. It is a congregation that was and is, in the words of Channing “always young for liberty”. It also has a history associated with several Presidents and would be Presidents of 25 Beacon Street.

The first President of the American Unitarian Association was Samuel Atkins Eliot II. He applied to be minister of the Arlington Street

Church, just after he had graduated from divinity school. Goodness knows he had the family connections. He was the son of the President of Harvard University! The grandson of a Boston Mayor!

However, the chair of that congregation's board declared: "What this congregation needs, is not veal, but beef!"⁵

And so Sam accepted a call to Denver, Colorado, from where he founded churches in Colorado Springs and Salt Lake City. From there he went on to the Church of the Savior in Brooklyn, NY. It was from that position that he first served on the board of the American Unitarian Association.

Upon joining the AUA board, Eliot urged measures that would transform the AUA into an engine of progress for both congregational and secular organizations, through application of the new "science" of corporate management. He

⁵ This quote was part of the lore at Arlington St. Church. I have never seen it in print before now.

and his allies hoped to restore the Unitarians' once prominent civil as well as religious leadership. In 1898 Eliot was elected AUA Secretary (then the administrative head). He resigned his pulpit and moved to Boston. In 1900 at his urging the board agreed to expand the executive powers of the Secretary and to call the holder of the office President, a title commanding greater respect. Eliot was then elevated to the expanded office. (Hitherto, the AUA president has been the board chair, without administrative power or responsibilities.)⁶

Eliot served as President of the American Unitarian Association for 27 years. And then retired from there.... to become minister of the Arlington Street Church, some thirty-eight years after his initial application.

I think there is a message there for anyone just commencing on a career in the ministry. I cannot say for sure exactly what that message

⁶ Curtis, Elizabeth, "Samuel Eliot II" in the Unitarian Universalist Online Biography. <http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/samuelatkinseliotii.html>.

is—or maybe I should say: there are several messages there—surely at least one of them will apply in your case. I leave it to you, Jennifer, to decipher it.

In my imagination the person whose spirit fills 25 Beacon Street is Dana MacLean Greeley. Dana served as minister of the Arlington Street Church, from there he went on to be the last President of the American Unitarian Association and the First President of the Unitarian Universalist Association after that new entity was created by the 1961 merger of Unitarians and Universalists. Dana entitled his book of autobiographical essays: “25 Beacon Street and other memories.”

Dana never missed a General Assembly. I would encounter him as we moved between caucuses and workshops. I would shake his hand and observe him peering over his bifocals to read my nametag. I would help him out by saying: “John Marsh, religious educator at Arlington Street Church. “Of course, you are!” He would boom and we would exchange a few

pleasantries before he turned to greet the next person.

And as I walked on (somewhat dazed) I would reflect on how he had left me with the impression that although our meeting was brief and he couldn't quite remember my name, Dana had really been looking forward seeing since he arrived at the conference. Perhaps, he had even come to the conference just for that chance encounter. And then I would wonder: "What kind of Jedi mind trick was that?" And "how can I learn to do it? Was there a day a divinity school where they taught that and I somehow missed the lesson?"

By the time I was in divinity school Dana Greeley had finished his tenure as President. I happened to be present one day when he made a return visit to his old workplace. 25 Beacon St. is built around central circular staircase extending from the ground floor all the way up to the top fifth floor. There are hallways extending away from the stairwell on each floor and various offices off of those hallways.

When Dana entered the building there was an audible buzz that started at the front door and extended throughout the building, and then, as if by some magic summoning, everyone came out of their offices to the central staircase, and applauded Dana as he ascended the stairs to his appointment.

Peter Morales, our current UUA President made the unfortunate remark that 25 Beacon Street is, in his imagination, “a symbol of exclusivity, of wealth and privilege.” That may have been true when Samuel Eliot occupied the building. I would argue that this was not the case when Dana Greeley was there. It sometimes seemed that Dana came from the lap of God filled with blessings to bestow upon us, and he certainly encouraged this public perception. However, he did not have the family connections nor the old money of the Eliot family.

When Sam Eliot was President of the American Unitarian Association the former President of the United States, William Howard Taft, was

President of the Laymen's League and participated regularly in the annual meetings of the Association.

When the 1962 General Assembly was held in Washington DC Dana Greeley wrote to President John F. Kennedy requesting him to appear at the conference. He began the letter: "Dear Jack,"⁷ Jack did not come to the General Assembly, but he did invite Dana and a small group of UUA leaders for a short private reception at the White House—a nice gesture, but essentially a photo op.

In my imagination, Dana and 25 Beacon Street exemplify a willingness to put up with discomfort, dysfunction, and eccentricity in order to carry your ancestors with you, and to speak from a place where their presence is fully intact, to exhibit grace under pressure.

I have come to believe that the only way Dana was able to work his Jedi mind trick was

⁷ This story was told to me by Ray Hopkins, Vice President of the UUA after merger. According to his story he argued unsuccessfully with Dana to change it to a more formal greeting.

because a part of him believed it himself. Dana was always thrilled to meet another person of goodwill, whether it was me or the President of the United States.

There is a photograph of Dana Greeley having finished hiking to the top of Mount Starr King in New Hampshire. He is wearing a three piece suit. When asked why he thought this was an appropriate hiking outfit he answered: “Well, you never know when you are going to have to make a parish call.”

I love that image of Dana. And it is still true today that once you are ordained – there are days away from work, but there are no days off from being a minister. In the words of the ancient holy scripture: “you will be a priest forever, after the Order of Melchizedek.”⁸ But Jennifer, if you were to go mountain hiking today dressed as if you were going to a formal event—people

⁸ Genesis 14, Psalm 110, Hebrews 7:2 Melchizedek is referenced in the ordination ceremonies in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions. This is curious since this priest king was a contemporary, but not follower, of the patriarch Abraham. This means he was neither Christian, nor Jewish, but a Canaanite leader. I would argue that Universalists have greater claim to his legacy.

would not think you were especially devoted to your calling, they would think that you had lost your mind.

25 Beacon Street was built at a time when little concern was given to insulating walls and windows. A piece of mail from California would have to go on a long train ride before it showed up in Boston. The ability to climb stairs was a pre-requisite for serving on a national committee.

If we are to respect the interdependent web, we must find ways to reduce our carbon footprint.

If we are to pass our faith on to future generations, we must keep pace with the electronic communications in which the youngest generation of adults already has its being.

If we intend to be truly welcoming to differently-abled people, to make room for a diversity of ability, we must find ways to extend to all people the full dignity due them.

For decades we have become increasingly aware of the ways our headquarters has been working against us.

And we began to understand that these frustrations may actually be threatening our long-term growth and vitality

We live in a time of increasing alienation and fragmentation.

The enduring notion of community is being lost.

Material consumption and mass marketing define our existence in ways almost too powerful to resist.

Our participation in genuine democracy is eroding, just as it seems we need it most.

The extreme concentrations of wealth and poverty have left our social contract with each other in tatters and our covenant with the planet all but broken.

Jennifer, you are beginning your career in a healing profession at a time when our world seems not merely fragmented, but broken in many ways.

But as devastating as this long list of woes is, I still have hope and I still have faith that we can build a better world.

For we share a religion that is not only relevant, but one that can change this world for good.

I believe this faith—that teaches us to honour life and to respect difference, to seek justice and to work for peace—is the religion the world needs for just such a time as this.

Every problem I mentioned a moment ago has, at its root, a spiritual crisis.

And, every problem, I believe has a spiritual cure that I think our theology speaks to in powerful ways.

I can't imagine feeling any better about the hand that is ours to play, for we are blessed with great gifts at a critical juncture in time.

One of our most tremendous strengths is a capacity for change. When other religions were threatened by the theory of evolution, we took its truth to heart.

Friends, the need for evolution is upon us. I commend President Peter Morales and the current UUA Board of Trustees for taking the bold step of moving to relocate our headquarters.

The healing of this world isn't entirely up to us, but I believe we can play an outsized role, if we were to come alive and model a different way of being.

This planet and her people are in desperate need of courageous souls who have come alive with a burning commitment to create a better and sustainable world—

*a world of justice and peace, held together in love.*⁹

Everything at 25 Beacon Street reminds us of our past accomplishments. Our new headquarters will have a display room that will remind us of our past. Everything else, like the ordination about to take place here in this sacred space, will remind us of our future.

⁹ Most of these ideas and phrases are from a lecture by my friend and colleague Shawn Newton. Shawn graciously gave me permission to edit his words for the purpose of his sermon. His lecture, *The Risks of Relevance*, was delivered at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Unitarian Council. The complete text may be found at: www.unitaria.net/can/cuc/The%20Risks%20of%20Relevance.pdf