

HERMAN MELVILLE'S UNITARIAN COMPASS

A talk by Laura Pedersen

All Souls Church Adult Education, Sunday September 19, 2021

“There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own.”

— Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Transcript of Laura's talk:

Please turn your cell phones to 19th century mode.

I'm not a Melville scholar. But Rev. David Robb (shout-out) had Professor Andrew Delbanco here to speak several times and he wrote this terrific book called *Melville: His World and Work*. Along with a biography of 19th Century Unitarian superstar minister William Ellery Channing. More about Channing soon.

Still, Delbanco didn't know about one Melville secret we'll discuss today, because it was only revealed after the publication of his book, and is rather a game changer in my opinion. But I love this book, and Delbanco carefully explains why Melville was a New York City writer, with which I agree.

Today I was asked to speak about my new book, *It's Come To This: A Pandemic Diary* (proceeds to go to Monday Night Hospitality and Friday Soup Kitchen). But I didn't see any reason to do that since you can all read, and I decided to talk about Melville instead.

Our minister at All Souls from 1955 to 1978 was Rev. Walter Donald Kring, who was a very keen historian and Melville scholar. Kring made the huge discovery that Herman Melville was a member of All Souls while researching a biography of our second minister, Henry Whitney Bellows (1839 – 1882). The big Augustus St. Gaudens bronze memorial tablet in the sanctuary is of Bellows. Kring became intrigued, continued his research and wrote this wonderful book about Bellows, which was published in 1979, *Henry Whitney Bellows (A History of the Unitarian Church of All Souls; v. 2)*.

The Kring book was a bomb because scholars had been largely teaching Melville as a Christian author in the Calvinist tradition, but we'll see why he was obviously Unitarian, at least a Unitarian of that time. Kring dedicated his work to “the numberless souls who have questioned their religious background, but who, like Herman Melville, have worked their way through doubt and despair to a reasonable and satisfactory religious belief.”

We also have this quote from Kring's book: “When Nathaniel Hawthorne and he talked together, Hawthorne felt that Herman was always asking the impossible questions.”

Herman Melville was born in 1819, when slavery was still legal in New York State, and died in 1891, 26 years after the Civil War ended. When he was born the population of NYC was 115,000 people and when he died it was 2.7 million. In his lifetime it went from basically a large town to a thriving metropolis.

Melville was born into the Dutch Reformed Church, the highly Calvinistic denomination of his mother's more established family. His father was a Unitarian but died when Herman was 12.

Melville was probably what we'd call bipolar today, and this would make his life challenging, for himself and his family. And he was probably an alcoholic.

Was Melville gay or bisexual? Short answer: we don't know. There's a lot of homoeroticism to wade through, along with speculation that he was in love with Nathaniel Hawthorne. There is plenty to read on the subject. So dive in and bring us a presentation!

Melville went to sea at age 20. On board ships he witnessed cruelties which strongly reinforced his views of how people should and should not treat one another. At various crime-infested docks he saw the worst disease and poverty imaginable. He was stunned and horrified by the public's indifference to human suffering and sorrow.

Traveling the world, Melville would also see firsthand colonial powers at work making conquests by military might. In French Polynesia and Hawai'i, he observed the work of missionaries up close – not just Catholics, but Protestant missionaries from New England – who had come to save the natives from Hell, which turned him against religious proselytization, and set him to questioning the core contents of Christianity. Melville was particularly struck by how the missionaries took over not only the minds of the natives, but also their property, spread disease, and practically enslaved people.

In his novel *Typee* (Tie-Pee) published in 1846, Melville argued that what the missionaries were doing was in fact the antithesis of true Christian spirituality. There were complaints by readers and reviewers.

In 1847, Melville married Elizabeth (Lizzie) Shaw, daughter of Massachusetts Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, prominent Boston Unitarians, at the New Old South Unitarian Church in Boston. (Sidebar: How do you have a "New Old" South Church? Many Congregationalist Churches converted to Unitarian, but this one had a schism, how typical of us, and split. When I was a kid the Buffalo Church provided sanctuary for Vietnam conscience objectors while the Amherst Church 5 miles away did not.)

The Melvilles bought a house at 103 Fourth Avenue here in New York with Herman's brother Allen and his wife, where his mother and sisters also resided. Herman and Lizzie attend All Souls in the late 1840s and again starting in the mid-1860s upon their return to NYC. The church was farther downtown then.

Melville's brother and his wife were Episcopalian, while his mother and two sisters were Dutch Reformed. Kring's book describes Sunday mornings at the Melville home: "Church service attendance was still a family institution in America, but the Melville clan at Fourth Avenue felt free to choose disparate denominations. We may imagine (with some amusement) no fewer than

ten people pouring out of the home at church time on a Sunday morning, and then parting to attend different services."

In 1849 they had a son named Malcolm who was christened at home by Rev. Henry Whitney Bellows, the young new minister at the now prosperous First Unitarian Church which will later change its name to All Souls. The next three children, Stanwix, Elizabeth and Frances, were christened by retired Unitarian minister Orville Dewey in Pittsfield, MA.

Melville would question the results of the Industrial Revolution like Charles Dickens and also Henry David Thoreau and later the hippies. His famous 1853 short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" (who said "I prefer not to") takes a hard look at a capitalist economy, the creation of an impersonal work environment, and its impact on human relationships.

In his novels *Redburn* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850) Melville fictionalizes his encounters with the starving downtrodden, hoping to rouse the public's social conscience as his own had been awakened. Once again, much like his contemporary in the UK, social justice novelist and sometimes Unitarian Charles Dickens. (1812 – 1870)

White-Jacket is a semi-autobiographical tale about Melville's year and a half aboard a US Navy frigate. Melville's social conscience is unavoidable as he weighs in heavily against flogging sailors for "things not essentially criminal, but only made so by arbitrary laws." And concludes that it's "religiously, morally and immutably *wrong*" in a country that claimed to be primarily Christian in its ethical standards.

Melville wasn't the only opponent of flogging, but he certainly helped to galvanize public opinion, and very shortly after the book's publication, the practice was abolished in the US Navy. That said, it wasn't exactly brave to be against flogging at this late date, BUT in 1850, we can easily read Melville's "flogging" as a metaphor for slavery, a decade before the Civil War.

Melville wrote a short story wherein the sexton of New York's Grace Church has the job of preventing loiterers from coming inside to beg or sleep, and his publisher wouldn't touch it for fear of offending the religious sensibilities of the public, or the powerful Grace Church itself.

Up to that time, no American writer was putting quite so much of himself and his own experiences into his fiction. Even Mark Twain hid his agnosticism. When Melville is disappointed by humanity you feel he's disappointed in himself.

Now back to Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing (1780 – 1842) – he has a plaque in our sanctuary and we could have an entire 6-week course on him. But for our purposes today, Channing was the minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston and the preeminent Unitarian preacher in the US in the early 19th century. He was a public intellectual in that he wrote about cultural and political subjects that fall outside a typical minister's scope.

Channing advocated for a more positive view of Christianity than the one presented by the Puritans and Calvinists, where God was a loving figure, and reverence for a humanity created in his image. He called people to ongoing spiritual improvement. Channing's exaltation of human potential was a precursor to Transcendentalism.

In fact, Ralph Waldo Emerson called Channing “our Bishop.” So here is a man who influenced Emerson, who influenced Thoreau.

Why does Channing have a plaque in our sanctuary? Because he was on his way to give a speech in Maryland when he stopped to stay at his sister Lucy Channing Russel’s house at 8 Broome Street. Lucy invited some friends round to hear her brother speak. Channing called the Bible a book of men, written for men, in the language of men, and said its meaning should be sought through reason in the same manner as other books.

Channing said Jesus was a human to be followed and not a God to be worshipped. This was the basis of the sermon he then delivered in Maryland, which caused an uproar and had “gone viral” (printed in many newspapers) by his return to NYC. A large hall was rented and after speaking to overflow crowds in three separate sessions he returned to Boston and the excited attendees went about starting the first Unitarian Church in NYC.

Three moves later and here we are.

Channing continued preaching, and after his death in 1842, a set of books called *The Works of William E. Channing*, was published in 1848, when Herman Melville was 29, and found its way into the Melvilles’ home. The big discovery made in 2013 is that these contain notes (aka marginalia) made in Herman’s hand and also that of his wife Lizzie. These volumes, with the Melvilles’ annotations, have been made available online by the New York Public Library (digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-works-of-william-e-channing).

These volumes were a hefty counterweight to Melville’s Calvinist upbringing, which scholars had been trading on for decades. And that was easy to do, since Melville knew his Bible forward and backward.

Clearly, Channing influenced Melville’s thinking on big questions such as Christian belief and ethics along with urgent social issues including poverty and slavery. Channing’s strong abolitionist platform even alienated some of his own congregants. He wrote passages such as, “It is the mark of a weak mind to cling to established forms of business when they clog instead of advance it.”

Melville’s (1849) book *Mardi* contains an island kingdom with ideals that come directly from Channing. One academic even described it as a Unitarian paradise whose inhabitants practice a rational religion whose ethical precepts do no more than echo the moral teachings of nature. Channing’s antislavery writings provide source material for Melville’s views on the nation’s most pressing moral issue of the time. And Channing was a probable source for the idea that Christianity’s most important contributions were its calls for forgiveness and charity.

Melville’s novella *Benito Cereno* is a fictionalized account about a revolt on a slave ship when Americans on both sides of the slavery divide feared a slave rebellion was imminent. Melville plumbs the depths of the relationship between oppressed and oppressor.

Author Russell Banks said about *Benito Cereno*, it’s “one of the few works of American literature to confront unflinchingly the African Diaspora and the violent history of race in America.”

Things get more interesting when one considers that Melville was born in 1819, almost four decades after William Ellery Channing. And how the mid-19th Century exploded with scientific advancements that Melville had to struggle to reconcile with religion.

Geology said the world wasn't created in seven days. Bones were being dug up all over the world showing ancient creatures of the past, even several extinct species of man.

And in 1859 we get the bomb – Darwin's Theory of Evolution.

When *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851, it was received poorly, a feeling which lasted until about the 1920s. We don't have time now to discuss its contents, but the story is about Captain Ahab's obsession to find and harpoon the white whale Moby Dick, who had in a previous voyage taken off one of the captain's legs. Which one? Melville never says, so if you're going as Captain Ahab for Halloween, take your pick.

Spoiler alert: The ship will be lost along with everyone on board except Ishmael. Moby Dick also lives.

What does Moby Dick symbolize? I don't know – evil, nature, God, fate, the ocean, the US, the universe? Or how about ourselves – inescapable, both attractive and repulsive. The best and worst of human nature?

In Calvinism there is no free choice. *Moby-Dick* is a tragedy because there was free choice. No one was forced to sail on the Pequod. Captain Ahab chose to pursue the white whale. His maniacal obsession was not determined by God but his own stubbornness, which led to everyone's demise except Ishmael.

As for Melville, we might determine he was obsessed with the problem of evil in the world and never found a good answer for its existence.

His next novel, *Pierre*, published in 1852, is again somewhat autobiographical, and similarly concerned with man fighting for spiritual survival. It has been called one of the first attempts at depth psychology in American literature. Or as Harvard psychologist Dr. Henry Murray wrote "*Pierre* is Oedipus-Romeo-Hamlet-Memnon-Christ-Ishmael-Orestes-Timon-Satan-Cain-Manfred, or more shortly an American Fallen and Crucified Angel." I had to look up Manfred – he's a Faustian noble living in the Alps in a dramatic poem by Lord Byron. (Bernese Alps located in Western Switzerland. Thank goddess for the Google, right?)

Melville was truly a pilgrim. He travelled the globe observing human nature and as any good kindergarten teacher will tell you, There's a lot of human nature in all of us. After the failure of his later books, he toured the Holy Land in 1857, and still didn't find the answers he was looking for. However, he wrote what is considered to be some of the best poetry of the Civil War period after Walt Whitman.

Nathaniel Hawthorne said of Melville, "He can neither believe or be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other."

In 1867, four months after the episode of marital difficulties which caused Lizzie to consult Rev. Bellows, as Kring describes in his book, Melville's son Malcolm died at the age of 18 from a

self-inflicted gunshot. So it appears this tragedy was not the cause of all the marital difficulties – they indeed pre-existed Malcolm’s death, which was most likely a suicide.

In 1886, Stanwix, the only surviving son, who suffered from mental illness, died at age 35 in San Francisco from tuberculosis.

Melville died in 1891 at the age of 72 of a heart attack, a self-described failed author. There was a simple funeral performed by All Souls minister Theodore Chickering Williams at the Melville home at 104 East 26th Street.

There was little mention of his passing in the New York newspapers and the NY Times misspelled MOBIE DICK. An article a week later referred to him as Hiram Melville. He’s interred at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. You can visit.

His wife Lizzie had remained with him, often transcribing and editing his work, and basically made her new home, in an apartment hotel eight blocks south, into a shrine to his memory. She remained with the All Souls congregation until she died in NYC in 1906, 15 years after her husband, at age 84, and was buried by his side.

Melville’s unpublished novella *Billy Budd* was stored in a breadbox until 1919, when a granddaughter began the publication process and it finally arrived 33 years after his death, in 1924.

Billy Budd is now considered one of the great short novels in the English language. Writer Thomas Mann, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, called *Billy Budd* the most beautiful story in the world and exclaimed “O could I have written that!”

When the novella is taught, it’s usually said that Billy has reenacted the death of Christ in a tale of sacrifice and redemption. But it may be more akin to Abraham performing the sacrifice of Isaac, torn by the conflict between love and duty, except in Melville’s retelling of the father-son story from Genesis, there is no intervention by a merciful God.

Either way, we can speculate that the failed novelist identified with Billy Budd, the figure crucified on the yardarm, and hopefully found peace within himself.

Melville had essentially been spurned because he didn’t want to write popular fiction about adventurous sailors, Godless savages, and south seas maidens; but rather preferred to grapple with the deeper problems of existence, many of which were taboo subjects for discussion at the time.

In the 1920s, a Melville reappreciation began that carries through to the present day. *Moby-Dick*, with its exceptional multicultural cast, is on pretty much every list of great American novels. (Really amazing when you consider the main character doesn’t show up until page 482 of a 506-page book, there aren’t any women in it, and not much of America either for that matter.)

William Ellery Channing, like any effective minister, seems to have shaped Melville’s sense of himself and his values. In 1851 Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne that his development had been all within the past few years, and since his 25th year “three weeks have scarcely passed that

I have not unfolded within myself.” Channing may deserve some credit here since he regularly spoke of unfolding a rational and moral existence as the chief duty and end to our being.

Channing said True religion is a life “unfolded within” and there is but one true happiness, that of a mind unfolding its best powers. Reading Channing, Melville seems to have found a kindred spirit and also a stimulus to moral, spiritual, and intellectual questioning, or perhaps *questing* is the better word, which are now qualities considered very Melvillean. In fact, the Hebrew name Yishmael means God listens, God will hear.

Rev. Walter Kring highlights how the conflict between Calvinism and Unitarianism – on the one hand, humanity doomed by sin and blind acceptance of Christ by the pre-chosen, with on the other hand, an inherently good humanity following in *deed* the *teachings* of Jesus to become right with God – was playing out in society, in Melville’s home, and within the author himself. But he argues that Melville made personal and literary peace with the Unitarian Church and with God through his own personal discoveries.

Not only did Melville reject the Calvinism of his youth, but any fixed system of belief that was **not** open to new truths.

Let’s close with Kring’s words since as our church historian, he speaks with clarity about Melville’s relationship with this institution at the time. This is from page 136 of Kring’s book:

“It was not that Melville had not searched for answers. He had probably searched as assiduously as almost any other human being.

He simply was not willing to take shortcuts and jump across the abyss to a belief that he could not find for himself, but must be taken upon authority.

He went through a struggle of the soul which found contentment not in the answers but in having struggled to find the answers, and to realize that we are human beings and not gods. He became intellectually and spiritually humble.

All Souls Church encouraged him to seek, even if he didn’t find all of the answers. And my impression is that instead of just wasting away until death came, he adjusted his thinking to the fact that the mysteries of the universe may remain just that, and like an alcoholic he turned to life one day at a time, and his impatience with God grew less, and he accepted more, even some human institutions that he had formerly ridiculed.

At the end, he found in the Unitarian religion, something which allowed him the freedom of no religious creeds, something that he could honestly intellectually and spiritually accept, and something which gave a soul that had been tormented for so long a peace that passeth human understanding.”